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ABSTRACT

This document consists of case studies documenting how distance education (DE) changed the lives of 23 women from the following locations: China; Hong Kong; India; Pakistan; Sri Lanka; and Bangladesh. The case studies illustrate that participating in DE can benefit not only a woman herself but also her husband, children, other family members, and other women. The case study titles are as follows: "Che Zhengying: Model Worker" (Huang Danqing); "Wu Zhuhui: Sacrifice and Perserverance" (Li Yawan); "Li Rong: Community Development" (Li Yawan); "Zheng Mengqi: Constant Pursuit" (Zhang Daixia); "Mabel Tam Fung-Yi: Inspiration for Her Daughters" (Margaret Taplin); "Esther Chan Shuk-Fong: Single Parent" (Margaret Taplin); "Lydia Cheung: Overcoming Adversity" (Margaret Taplin); "Li Hong: New Immigrant" (Elaine Kwok, Margaret Taplin); "Anuradha Datt: Towards Self-Reliance" (Asha S. Kanwar); "Jyoti Mendiratta: Surmounting Barriers" (Asha S. Kanwar); "Shanta: Hopes Fulfilled" (Shobhita Jain); "Seema Pal: A Dream Realised" (Madhulika Kaushik); "Sophy: Noble Aspirations" (Mridula Rashmi Kindo); "Shahnaz Basheer: Sharing Difficulties" (Atifa Durrani); "Samina: Rising above Adversity" (Atifa Durrani); "Premaseeli Amarasinghe: Effective Time Management" (Nalini Ratnasiri); "Sujatha Seneviratne: Family Care-Giver" (Nalini Ratnasiri); "Sandhya Doluweera: Dream Realised" (Nalini Ratnasiri); "Hemamali Withanachchi: Seizing Opportunities" (Nalini Ratnasiri); "Kalpana Rani Sen: Overcoming Fears" (Monira Hossain); "Chowdhury Shamima Akter: Supportive Family" (Monira Hossain); "Mehmuda Begum: True Perseverance" (Monira Hossain); and "Kazi Tauhida Akhter: New Generation Student" (Monira Hossain). (Contains 63 references.) (MN)

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# BRAVE NEW WOMEN OF ASIA:

## How Distance Education Changed Their Lives

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# BRAVE NEW WOMEN OF ASIA:

## How Distance Education Changed Their Lives

*Asha S. Kanwar and Margaret Taplin, Editors*

THE COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

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Asha S. Kanwar and Margaret Taplin, editors

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# INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book of case studies is to inspire and encourage women to participate in open and distance learning. Going through the case studies, potential women learners will see that most of their reservations and fears are unfounded. Other questions in their minds about how to cope with studies after a long gap, at a mature age or without regular tutorials will be answered as they read about the experiences of other women like themselves.

These days it is becoming not only a luxury for those women who are capable of doing so to participate in higher education, but a necessity for improving the quality of their economic, social and spiritual lives and/or for coping with changes to their living standards, as well as for providing protection from exploitation. Further, without appropriate levels of education, opportunities are being restricted for these women to fulfil their collective responsibility to participate in bringing about social change.

It has been claimed that for developing countries, without investment in women's education and health, "human capital will continue to remain undeveloped and the [economies] ... will suffer unnecessarily the consequences in terms of foregone production, diminished family welfare and rapid population growth" (Women's International Network News, 1990). Evidence has been presented (for example, Chaudry, 1995) that women who attended adult education classes became more confident, which in turn equipped them with better mobility, expression, understanding and ability to make decisions and accept responsibility. There were benefits not only for the women themselves, but for their husbands, children, families and communities. For example, it has been found that educated mothers are able to contribute more effectively to the quality of their children's education (Raj, 1982; Chaudry, 1995). They are able to provide more stimulating experiences for their children (Raj, 1982) and are better able to help with their schooling and supplementary tutoring. They are also more able to afford to buy goods and services for their children and have a greater chance of helping them to find employment through their contacts (Le Vine, 1982). Furthermore, educated women have demonstrated a better ability to keep control of their husband's expenditures and to maintain their own economic independence, to improve household management, and be more able to save money and generally contribute more to the family income pool (Chaudry, 1995). Needless to say, they also develop a greater political and social consciousness that enables them to contribute more effectively to society.

Recently, evidence has been presented that suggests that women in Asia have grown and developed in several ways and that the generalisations of the eighties no longer hold true. For example, studies by Taplin (2000) and CRIDAL (2000) have indicated that:

- Given the opportunities, women in Asia, like their counterparts elsewhere, are keen to embark on self-development initiatives without being hampered significantly by the social or cultural inhibitions imposed on them.
- Better and easily accessible educational opportunities and the impact of communication technologies on the social and cultural environment are making substantial differences to the attitudes, values and concerns of Asian women.
- In this changing scenario, Asian women are likely to benefit much more from improved access to education. They have the confidence, the will and the motivation.

Nevertheless, the majority of women accessing higher education still appear to be those who are privileged, who have the support of their husbands or families and who are mostly young, career-oriented and living in urban areas (Pascall and Cox, 1993; Taplin, 2000; CRIDAL, 2000). Particularly among women living in rural areas, there are still many social, cultural and religious taboos that prevent those women who can and should be accessing higher education from doing so.

**Barriers to participation**

One significant factor that can affect adult women's participation in education is the social context. In many western and Asian countries, there is a pervading expectation that education is more important for males than for females (Tremaine and Owen, 1984), especially since after marriage women leave to join their husbands' families and, hence, are not regarded as being useful to their own families in the long term. An outcome of this attitude can be lack of emotional and financial support or even demonstrated hostility concerning studies (Lunneborg, 1994).

Where there are large numbers of children in a family, the preference is often given to boys because they will be relied upon to support their parents in their old age (Gandhe, 1998). In some Asian countries these social expectations can further lead to women being financially dependent and unable to travel beyond the immediate neighbourhood to participate in studies unless accompanied by a male member of the family (Kanwar, 1995a, 1995b), or it can mean that they are often required to work in unskilled labour because they are willing to work for lower wages than men (Chaudry, 1995). Women are expected to marry and have a family, and it is commonly believed that a university degree will not help to find a bridegroom (Sharma, 1995). In fact, it has been suggested that educated women are often seen as a threat to the traditional male authority, so higher education can actually inhibit their chances of finding a marriage partner (Niemann and Romero, 2000).

Many women are expected to do all the housework and take responsibility for child care (Phillip, 1993), and therefore they have fewer hours of free time than men, both during the weekend and on weekdays (Kirkup and von Prummer, 1997). Consequently, many of the adult women who do take up higher education find it necessary to balance their studies with multiple roles in the home and the work place (Effeh, 1991). In fact, reasons given by rural, low-income women for not participating in adult education were that they did not want to leave their children or that they did not start a course because they thought their multiple commitments would mean they would not able to attend all sessions (Lee et al., 1995).

There can also be a range of personal or personality problems that characterise many adult women with respect to their participation in education. One is that they tend to lack confidence and to be too hard on themselves when things are not going well (Home, 1995; Sesharatnam, 1995). Another is that many, particularly in those rural, low-income areas, are reluctant to go to courses by themselves (Lee et al., 1995). Another factor is that female students, more than males, tend to display a preference for co-operative learning in supportive environments where they can share their problems and achievements (Burnham, 1988; Hipp, 1997; Kumar, 1999), whereas higher education environments are often not conducive to this. All of these social factors that contribute to lack of emotional or financial support for women studying are contradictory to evidence that women students thrive best in supportive environments where they can share their problems and achievements (Burnham, 1988).

In their work with women in the United States, Brewster and Padavic (2000) identified a number of attitudes and beliefs that blocked women from working or participating in higher education:

- Preschool children suffer when their mothers work.
- Working mothers cannot have relationships with their children.
- It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career.
- It is better for everyone if the men are the achievers and the women take care of the home.

Many of these difficulties and concerns experienced by women, particularly those in rural or low-income areas, point to the fact that distance education may be an ideal way for them to access education, since it potentially enables them to do most of their studying from home if they wish to do so, thus reducing the need to conflict with social or cultural requirements. However, the reality is that too many women are not utilising this opportunity, in part due to the stereotypical attitudes that still prevail among themselves as well as among their husbands, children and other family members. Consequently, if this situation is to change, it is necessary to look for ways in which attitudes to women's education can be changed.

**Changing attitudes**

In the past decade, there has been some research that has addressed issues of how and why people change their attitudes about women's traditional roles. While much of this research has been conducted in the United States and in Latin-American countries, it is also likely to be applicable in the Asian context.

Brewster and Padavic (2000) have examined some of the macro-level dynamics underlying these changes, finding that economic reversal in which men are thrown into unemployment is the factor most likely to bring about quick change. In the United States, the need for women to have an increasing role in earning the family's income has brought about changes in attitudes about traditional roles of women being responsible for housework and child care and men for income (Brewster and Padavic, 2000). Even in developing countries such as Bangladesh, similar economic pressures of the past decade have meant that women are being permitted to take up paid employment outside the home (Women's International Network News, 1990).

Two studies have suggested that men are more conservative than women about changing their attitudes to these things (Echabe and Gonzalez Castro, 1999; Brewster and Padavic, 2000). On the other hand, there may be a tendency for women to resist change because they may believe "that they have more to lose from the erosion of traditional gender relationships" (Brewster and Padavic, 2000). Nevertheless, it has been suggested that changes in women's attitudes about their roles can be influenced by their identifying with other women's experiences (Echabe and Gonzalez Castro, 1999).

The purpose of this book is to promote the use of ordinary women and their experiences in distance education as role models to influence attitudes not only of women themselves, but also of those significant family members who can potentially either support or hinder women. It was decided that one effective way to achieve this could be through the use of case studies. There have been several reports of positive outcomes of using case studies and biographies as teaching tools to change attitudes and beliefs about a wide range of issues (Coleman, 1989; Henson, 1988; Merseth, 1990), by prompting reflection and personal involvement (Andrews, 1997), and by promoting critical thinking (Holm, 1995). It has been suggested that the effectiveness of this medium is due to its emphasis on the "human variable" (English, 1994).

The case studies are from Mainland China, Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. The focus is on addressing the issues that are most likely to influence attitude changes in other women and their husbands and families. Some of these are:

- Distance education can benefit the husband, children and other family members without taking the wife/mother away from the home too much to do her studies.
- The woman herself can benefit.
- Children can benefit rather than suffer.
- A mother who studies can still be devoted to her children.
- Distance education can enable the mother to stay home with the children.
- The wife's participation in distance education can also benefit the husband.
- It is helpful to share experiences of opposition from family members and how this changed.
- How women can overcome fears and worries about being a student.
- Women can support each other by sharing their experiences of sacrifice and difficulties.

**Please note:** Some of the women in the case studies are identified by first name only to protect their identity.

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# CHINA

**Introduction**

Only about 9% of the population of over 1.2 billion in China reach higher education and of these the gender ratio is approximately two males for every female (UNESCO PROAP, 1999). While the national government tries to ensure equality of access to higher education, there is a tendency for females to opt for vocational and teacher training courses (UNESCO PROAP, 1999). There is also a tendency for families, particularly in rural areas, to consider it less worthwhile to educate girls than boys because the girls will marry and go to join other families (UNESCO PROAP, 1999).

The women described in these case studies were selected from a range of backgrounds. Three of the women, Che Zhengying, Wu Zhuhui and Zheng Mengqi, had their schooling interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, so for them distance education represented a second chance at education in their adult years when work and family commitments made it impossible for them to resume their education after the Revolution. The fourth woman, Li Rong, came from a rural village and was motivated to make a contribution to her community by studying strawberry farming. Her persistence led her to establish a successful model farm that has become inspirational not only to her own community, but also to experts throughout China and even those from other countries.

## CHE ZHENGYING: MODEL WORKER
**Huang Danqing**

Che Zhengying was born in Guizhou province in China. She had received only six years' compulsory education (five years of primary school plus one year of junior middle school) before she attended Guizhou Radio & TV University. It was at university where she was provided with an opportunity to receive higher education and to become a successful woman.

When Che Zhengying was studying in junior middle school, her schooling was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, which caused most of schools to stop teaching. During the Cultural Revolution, there was a policy that some young workers, peasants and soldiers (some cadres or poor people who came from good family background) could be recommended to attend university. Unfortunately, Che Zhengying was not one of these because she had a bad family background (her father was called a "capitalist roader"). Since she lost the chance to receive higher education, she had to begin working in the Business Department when she was very young. Several years later, she got married, had children...and divorced. She thought she would never be able to enter a university to realise her beautiful dream.

Che Zhengying worked very hard. In 1982, she became a head of the promotion section of a food company in Guizhou province. She used some basic knowledge and self-study to organise the staff in the whole system to learn professional knowledge. She was also responsible for promotional and educational

work. She did her utmost to work, yet she always felt her knowledge was too limited. However, at this time an opportunity arose.

Guizhou Radio & TV University offered a course in Chinese literature. Che Zhengying applied for it and got a chance at last. In the first semester, she learned modern Chinese, Chinese history, Chinese literature, basic writing and political economics. She studied day and night in order not to lag behind the other students. She was an unusual student, as she was also a caretaker of the TV class, appointed by the Business Department.

While Che Zhengying studied in the TV University, reading literary works and doing her homework, she had to take care of her daughter who attended kindergarten. While she was reading, her daughter often disturbed her and begged her to tell stories. Che Zhengying had to comfort her daughter, which prevented her from concentrating on work and made her anxious about her studies. But then she had a good idea:

> I could use simple words to tell some of the Chinese and foreign literature stories I was reading to my daughter. First I let her listen to the ancient poems as I read them aloud; then I taught her to recite them. In this way, not only did I satisfy my daughter, I also taught her to study herself. She received some enlightened education as a little girl and as a result performed better than other pupils when she studied in the primary school.

In the beginning, the TV University was short of classroom and teaching facilities such as television, radio and so on. Che Zhengying searched for suitable places and raised some money together with her classmates to buy some audiovisual aids. In the meantime, she spent a lot of time searching for a good teacher among the traditional universities to become a tutor for the TV class. In addition, she had to persuade some students' work units to support their staff's study in the class. Because some work units stopped providing the students' salaries, Che Zhengying and other students contributed some money to help them overcome their difficulties. She made up her mind not to let any student drop out.

In 1983, Guizhou Radio & TV University provided several subjects in economics. Since the students in Che Zhengying's class came from several large companies attached to the Business Department in Guizhou province, and considering the urgent needs of professionals in business management, the leaders of the Business Department hoped that the students of the original TV class, majoring in Chinese literature, would change their major to business management.

Che Zhengying informed her classmates of the leaders' proposal. However, more than 30 students were unwilling to give up their study in Chinese literature. They preferred to study the courses in business management and Chinese literature at the same time. This was really a challenging task for Che Zhengying because she had never learned advanced mathematics. But she studied very hard. She listened to the lectures carefully, consulted other younger students and did much homework. At last she overcame all difficulties and passed the mathematics examination.

This unique class that majored in two subjects at the same time, achieved great successes. Among 33 graduates, three were employed by the Guizhou Daily Press, three by Guizhou Procuratorate and more than 10 returned to their original work units to be promoted to managers or deputy managers.

After graduation, Che Zhengying returned to her original company. She assumed the position of head of the business section for two years. She made great profits for her company. In subsequent years she was promoted to general manager and secretary of the Party Committee owing to her great achievements.

Some of the courses that Che Zhengying studied, such as business accounting, business economics and computer science, improved her skills of business management greatly. For example, one time an accountant couldn't make the accounts balance when she checked the items at the end of the year. When she told Che Zhengying about it, Che Zhengying helped the accountant check the advance payment and the cash on delivery to see if the accounts were kept repeatedly. At last the accountant found the problem, and Che Zhengying helped her company recover 200,000 yuan (RMB) of lost funds. Che Zhengying realised that as a manager she should not only know the business of accounting but also grasp the knowledge of management in order to cope with the complicated market-directed economy.

In 1994, Che Zhengying was awarded the title of "model worker" by the Ministry of Internal Trade of China. At present, Che Zhengying is the secretary of the Party Committee in Hualian Travel Corporation in Guizhou. As a top leader of a large joint-stock company which owns 350 million yuan (RMB) worth of property, she has to face many challenges and cope with a lot of complicated situations. She realises that the knowledge that she gained from the TV University benefited her a lot. There is a saying in China: "Where there is a will, there is a way." Not only did the TV University give her the knowledge, but also the willpower.

Since Che Zhengying has a good grasp of literature and professional knowledge, she is adept in writing. Though she has been a top leader in the company for many years, she has never let other staff help her write any articles. In recent years, Che Zhengying has written dozens of articles, such as papers on economics, finding reports, summary reports, rules and regulations, work plans and so on. Among them, five papers were published in *Business Economy* and other famous periodicals.

In 1995, Che Zhengying passed the national unified examination for professionals in economics and was awarded the formal qualification. In 1999, she was involved in the study of Management Model A through TV teaching. Though she is nearly 50 years old now, as a distance education student she is still receiving further education in the relevant profession. Che Zhengying has learned a lot from distance education. In her opinion, distance education is a good way to extend lifelong education.

## WU ZHUHUI: SACRIFICE AND PERSEVERANCE

**Li Yawan**

Wu Zhuhui was born in 1950 and grew up in a city. In 1968, she graduated from a junior high school, but could not go further in her studies because it was the period of the Cultural Revolution. Like most city girls, she went to the countryside to begin another kind of lifestyle. There, together with the local farmers, she learnt to cut wood, carry straw, plough the field and cook her meals. She witnessed the hardship of the poor and humble people, and her own experiences tempered her strong will. As she had been educated in the traditional formal school and was used to reading even under difficult conditions, she tried her best to find some books to read, especially on rainy days when nobody would go to the field.

In 1971, as an educated youth, Wu Zhuhui was recruited to be a worker in a brickyard. In an accident, her left wrist was fractured. Three years later, she was transferred to a department store as a saleswoman. By then she was married, and a year later she gave birth to a child. She says of that time, "Though it seemed

that my life was going well, I had never given up my desire to study further. From the television and newspapers, I learnt there was a TV university that was very flexible for people like me to choose venues and subjects."

When Wu Zhuhui was 32 years old, she decided to take part in the national entrance examination for adults. She was very excited when she was informed of her admission; finally her dream of being back in school was to be realised. This school was not like the one she had ever been to. It was an open university — open to a variety of people and open to the society. This kind of school gave people another opportunity to pursue their studies.

The class was run by the Commercial Commission of Guizhou City, and Wu Zhuhui's major was Commercial Business Management. As the oldest female student in the class, she had more difficulties to overcome. She had family burdens and a very young child. Her fundamental knowledge wasn't always enough for her to understand many new terms, as it was 12 years since she had left school. She had many worries:

> As a student in TV University, I had to study complicated calculus and advanced mathematics. The pressure was much greater than what I had previously encountered when working in the field, in the factory and in the department store. I had to spend double or triple time in learning compared with the other younger students. I often wondered, "Could I manage?"

Her mother, once a graduate from Beijing University, showed great concern for her study. She encouraged her to study further by telling her a moving story of an elderly relative. He started to learn three foreign languages in his sixties. He wrote the words and phrases on tiny slips of paper and recited whenever he could. He posted them on the wall, put them in his pocket and carried them to the bus. That story really enlightened Wu Zhuhui. She wrote formulas and principles on small pieces of paper, too. She hung them in her mosquito net, on the wall, and in the kitchen so that she could read them whenever she looked up.

During her first year at the TV University, Wu Zhuhui did not go even once to a cinema or a park. Her son complained, "Why don't you do things like other mums? You seem to have gone mad reading and reading, and you have never taken me to the playground like other mums." Wu Zhuhui was very sad and sometimes felt as if she was not taking her responsibility as a mother seriously enough. However, she believed it was all worthwhile, knowing that a mum should not only give her son pleasure, but that she should set an example for the children to follow as well. She was rewarded by good achievements for the year. She could see that her hard work was not fruitless.

Wu Zhuhui can never forget what the tutors gave to her. They were responsible teachers, and whenever she had questions, she would contact them by telephone. And they, without hesitation, helped her. There was always a timetable in the office, telling everybody which tutor was on duty. The tutors were middle-aged, kind and amiable, and with rich experiences in teaching. She also gained courage and support from her group peers in her study. They constructed the groups voluntarily and chose a home as a centre. They discussed the contents of the courses and tutorials and many personal affairs. Through such groups, students could be concentrated in one room, watching the programme or videotapes, discussing the contents, sometimes even arguing and debating heatedly over an issue. This helped everyone, giving them more confidence and reducing their loneliness. It was really exciting and stimulating. And by all her efforts, Wu Zhuhui obtained the expected results. At the closing ceremony, she was proud to be chosen as one of the excellent students.

Upon graduation, Wu Zhuhui went back to her grassroots unit and was soon promoted to Deputy Manager of Dongfeng Department Store. She was able to apply her knowledge to her working practice. The economic efficiency increased year by year and she was praised for performing so well.

She had more chances to study in Beijing Women's Cadre Institute and Yantai Hualian Commercial Corporation. After that, she was nominated as the General Manager of Peishuichi Shopping Centre. It was the time of market decrease and a lower period of development. With the support of the local government, she decided to take an innovative measure in the store with a view to changing the personnel and employment systems to bring positive factors into full play by "promoting and nominating cadres in accordance with their capacity and effective performance" and "signing contracts with all the employees." By 1994, the sales volume in her working unit reached about 7.2 million yuan (RMB), an increase of 42%. The profits turned over to the state were 3.9 million yuan (RMB), which was an increase of 57%. The net value of fixed assets increased 1.2 million yuan (RMB) on the whole. The Shopping Centre was subsequently awarded the titles of "National Trusted Commercial Enterprise," "Civilised Enterprise," and the special "AAA enterprise with reliable reputation."

Facing the challenges of one batch after another of big stores mushrooming in Guiyang, the Peishuichi Shopping Centre set up a limited corporation of five chain stores and then merged with the Guiyang Commodity Wholesale Company. The same year, its sales volume was 120 million yuan (RMB) and the profit was 5.8%. The management cost decreased 700,000 yuan (RMB) and the store fulfilled the sales profit index a month before.

Seeing the steady advancement of a successful enterprise made Wu Zhuhui feel good. She was given many titles for her efforts, such as "National Excellent Female Entrepreneur" and "March 8 Red Banner." She was named one of "the ten outstanding women" in Guizhou Province. She was also chosen as a people's representative to attend the 9th National People's Congress in Beijing.

Wu Zhuhui believes that her experiences show that TVU students are best needed by the local economy. Students from TVU can find their place to exert their initiatives.

## LI RONG: COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT

**Li Yawan**

Li Rong comes from a small village by the Hunhe River in north-east China. In 1985 when she graduated from a senior high school, she went back to rural areas doing some work of issuing ID cards to the local citizens. In 1990 she was involved in the work of the national population census, and in 1993 she started work in a kindergarten. Since she took good care of the children, she was respected and trusted by the local farmers, which enhanced her own confidence.

When China carried out a policy to emancipate the farmers from poverty, the local government showed great concern for the local development of agricultural economy and began to realise how important it was to improve the living conditions by means of science and technology. But it is an arduous task to keep everyone living a better life.

As Li Rong was a daughter of farmers born in a rural area, she had a strong desire to change the fate of the farmers. On one occasion, she happened to receive a programme for Liaoyuan School. She was told that the school specialised in providing programmes of applied knowledge and skills for farmers which would help them to live a better life. She contacted Liaoyuan School and got some videotapes and reading materials on how to cultivate strawberries. She found it all interesting, so she took part in a training class. When she visited with other local farmers at a greenhouse in Donggang City, she was shocked by their output. She immediately thought that she could use what she had learnt to disseminate the technology within her own area.

She tried to raise 17,000 yuan (RMB) and borrowed 10,000 yuan (RMB) from the local bank. She then bought seedlings, set up a greenhouse and began the work. Without much experience, she failed in the first year. Many friends and relatives tried to persuade her not to take her studies any further. But she couldn't give up her idea. She sent her child to the grandparents and simply moved from the comfortable living with her husband to the field. She bought books on cultivation technology for strawberries and on using pesticides and fertilisers. She tried to understand the technology through studying the materials, and she went to the local professors for help whenever she had questions. She carefully observed every single change when the seedlings were growing. She took notes on what happened when she brought in fertiliser, watered the seedlings, and adopted measures for insect prevention. With consistent practical efforts, she took her first steps towards being better off. In 1997, the output reached 2100 kg for 0.5 um (hectare) and the income was 15,000 yuan (RMB).

Li Rong was set up as a model for the local farmers to follow and then invited to be a part-time tutor in the local Liaoyuan School. She says:

> Through my own experience and learning method, I instructed the new viewers on how to apply what they learnt to real life and how they could find pleasure and courage from their learning programmes. I received many friends and guests, who came from African or Asian countries such as Mali, Japan and Korea. I never expected that by cultivating strawberries I could make any contribution to international friendship!

By self-study, Li Rong learnt how to raise questions. When an expert from the Netherlands came to her village to give lectures, she asked him two questions. The expert was so surprised that a farmer at a small village should ask such in-depth questions. He had intended to give a lecture for one hour, but had to prolong it by three hours. This is just one example of how technology can change a person's life and philosophy.

Li Rong still feels her skills are not sufficient. She has to keep up with the latest information and agricultural development and to participate in more training classes to improve her quality of life. Already, she has started further learning through distance mode provided by the China Agriculture University. Her experience indicates that learning must be combined with practice, which will be more efficient to obtain considerable outcome.

**ZHENG MENGQI: CONSTANT PURSUIT**
**Zhang Daixia**

Zheng Mengqi graduated in 1988 from Beijing Radio and Television University (BTVU), and she has been the director of the Wangfujing Savings Office of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) since 1990.

When she graduated from junior high school, the Cultural Revolution, the unprecedented calamity, began in China. BTVU was compelled to shut down. At that time, the common senior high schools were deprived of the right of enrolment, and there was no more admission into any institute or college of higher education. Under these circumstances, Zheng Mengqi began working after being granted her junior high school diploma. Being young and enthusiastic, she never flinched from hardship, and she was willing to contribute her little bit. Although a few achievements were acquired in her work, she often felt frustrated and perplexed. Her insufficiency of knowledge and flimsiness of professional theories diminished her confidence when facing opportunities and challenges.

In 1979, BTVU resumed recruiting students. It provided more convenience and opportunities for youth at work. Zheng Mengqi was just one of these people who enjoyed the happiness of going back to the classroom, her heart thirsty for knowledge.

After graduation from the BTVU, Zheng Mengqi was assigned as the director of the Wangfujing Savings Office of ICBC. It was the year when the internal competition had become extremely intense with the development of the financial industry. Faced with the challenges of the competition, Zheng Mengqi mobilised the staff to pool their wisdom. She adopted the suggestions of the staff and paved the way to try out a multifunctional savings bank office with the support of the leadership.

While consolidating the traditional services, she opened a series of new services in the bank, including foreign currency fixed and current deposits, personal foreign exchange sales, exchange settlement, payment for Taiwan remittance, credit cards, personal consumption and small enterprise mortgage loans, small enterprise transfers and settlements, bill acceptance and transference, agency securities issue and payment, agency keeping and handling negotiable securities, proxy insurance, etc. Great efforts were made to construct a comprehensive financial services environment through improving the savings bank's service function step by step. In 1993, the Wangfujing Savings Office was awarded the "May 1st" diploma and was named "Advanced Unit of Beijing Municipal Spiritual Civilisation" by the National General Labour Union. Zheng Mengqi was conferred as "Advanced Worker of Beijing" by the People's Government of Beijing Municipality in 1995, and in May of the same year she was designated as "National Labour Model" by the State Department.

Learning at BTVU not only broadened Zheng Mengqi's vision, but also enriched her knowledge. Her professional theoretical level and working capacity were promoted as well. During the period of study, she further realised the value of time and learned to arrange her life by balancing work, home life and studies in a reasonable way.

By staying positive, constantly forging ahead and assiduously studying, Zheng Mengqi was able to complete her studies. Since then, she has applied the knowledge learned in her practical work and has fully devoted her wisdom and talent in her working positions.

**Conclusion**

The four women featured in this section faced and overcame problems of family and work commitments and the burden of studying alone by employing creative solutions and by sheer perseverance. All were motivated by the need to help or support others: their families, their colleagues and, in the case of Li Rong, the farmers in her local community. Che Zhengying, for example, combined her studies with her need to care for her daughter by teaching the child the Chinese literature that she was studying herself. When Wu Zhuhui's young son complained that she was not taking him to the park as did other mothers, she rationalised that she was offering him something more important, by modelling for him effective study habits. Support for their fellow students was a particular feature of these women's study habits. While Che Zhengying, as class caretaker, took great care to support her classmates emotionally, with teaching resources and even financially from her own pocket, Wu Zhuhui found great benefit from participating in study groups. The case studies demonstrate how these women drew their inspiration from friends or relatives who had also studied successfully, and were not put off by being older or slower at learning than their classmates.

# HONG KONG, SAR, CHINA

**Introduction**

While it must be acknowledged that in Hong Kong there are groups of women who are accessing higher education and are being highly successful doing so, it is still clear that there are others who are not. Data from the *1996 Population By Census Main Tables* (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong), these being the most up-to-date currently available in Hong Kong, suggest that there are groups of women whose quality of life may be affected by lack of education. For example, they indicate that women are over-represented in the lower-income brackets (HK$4000 per month and below) and under-represented in those from HK$6000 per month upwards. Fifty-four percent of adult women have received education to lower secondary level only. Excluding those who have pursued teaching and nursing education, which accounts for 1% of the adult women in Hong Kong, only 13% have completed any higher education including technician level, higher diploma, associateship or equivalent in polytechnics, non-degree, degree and post-graduate courses. Four percent of the adult Hong Kong population are women who are unpaid family workers, with 65% of this group having not received education beyond lower secondary school. These data certainly seem to suggest that there may be some wasted potential among Hong Kong women. Until more recent census statistics are released, it can only be assumed that the post-1997 statistics, particularly with the recent increase in immigrant numbers, will indicate even more wasted potential.

Although education is considered in Chinese societies as an important avenue to improving socio-economic status (Cheng, 1998), it can sometimes be more difficult for women than for men to take advantage of educational opportunities. Traditionally, where there were large numbers of children in families, the preference was often given to boys because they would be relied upon to support their parents in old age. While these social traditions are no longer prevalent in Hong Kong, it was quite common prior to the introduction of compulsory nine-year education and the Grants and Loans Scheme in the 1970s for boys to be given priority in accessing education. Hence, there is evidence of women in Hong Kong who missed out on receiving a "first chance" at education prior to the 1970s, and others who might have missed opportunities to enter fields where the greatest opportunities lie, who are now finding it necessary to utilise opportunities for a "second chance" in order to enhance the quality of their lives financially and socially (Taplin and Poon, 1999). Many of the adult women who do take up second-chance education find it necessary to balance their studies with multiple roles in the home and the work place, and hence their studies can be affected by domestic organisation and interruptions. In Hong Kong, although westernised, most families are still "traditional" in the sense that women continue to take up major responsibilities at home. Some interviews with women in the older age groups suggest that a number have family members who would prefer them not to be studying and hence do not give very much emotional support (Taplin and Poon, 1999).

Four women were selected from the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) Public Affairs Unit's file of successful students to relate their stories. The first, Mabel Tam Fung-yi, tells an inspiring story of how she overcame an impoverished childhood and her mother's opposition to her studying, and how her distance

education studies helped her two young daughters to develop their own good study habits. Esther Chan, a single parent, describes her struggles to balance her studies with her full-time job and the need to spend quality time with her two children. Lydia Cheung spent several years caring for a dearly loved but chronically ill child, and Li Hong was an immigrant from Mainland China and needed a degree to establish herself in her new home.

## MABEL TAM FUNG-YI: INSPIRATION FOR HER DAUGHTERS

**Margaret Taplin**

Mabel was born in Hong Kong. When she was seven years old her parents divorced and, being the youngest child, she was the only one of her brothers and sisters to be sent by the court to live with her mother. In those days most Chinese parents preferred to have sons, and her mother had really wanted her brother and not her. Her mother was very depressed by the divorce and spent most of her time playing mah-jong, a popular form of gambling for Chinese people. Their living conditions were difficult. There was never enough money and their home was in an area that was full of drug dealing and illegal gambling.

When Mabel was in Primary 4, her mother wanted her to give up school and go to work in a factory to earn money to support their income. But Mabel begged her mother to allow her to continue her studies and promised not only that she would study hard, but that she would also share the work. After school she would hurry to finish her homework and then help her mother to sew dolls' clothes, which was their main source of income.

Two years later Mabel's mother gave up sewing and found a new source of income, taking care of a newborn baby whose parents had needed to work in Thailand for a two-year contract. Even though she was just 10 years old, most of the responsibility of caring for the baby fell to her, as her mother was away playing mah-jong most of the time.

In school holidays Mabel would work in a factory to raise the money to pay for her school fees, since there was no free education in Hong Kong at that time. It was illegal for a 10-year-old child to work, so she used an older child's ID, and the employers, who were out to exploit, turned a blind eye.

Every year Mabel's mother argued that Mabel should leave school and get a full-time job in a factory to support them, and every year Mabel begged to be allowed to continue. Eventually she managed to complete her secondary schooling. Her results were not so good but not so bad either. She wanted to go on, but her mother stopped her, saying, "After all of this you're still not satisfied. It's better that you go out to work." Of course, she was very disappointed not to be able to continue with her studies.

For two years Mabel worked as a clerk in her former secondary school and supported herself and her mother. From observing the teachers in the school, she formed the opinion that teaching was quite a good profession. Because of this, and also because she wanted to have a good income to help her mother to have a better life, she applied to college. However, she was rejected because she had taken the subject of Principles of Accounts rather than Mathematics, which was a prerequisite. So she undertook self-study to complete her GCE Mathematics and finally saved enough money to enrol in the Technical Teachers'

College. Her mother was angry, asking, "How about our life? Who will pay for our living?" Mabel had no ideas, but she thought that somehow she would find a way. Fortunately, one of her former secondary school teachers told her that his brother was looking for a part-time accounts clerk, and Mabel was given this job. Her salary was exactly the amount she needed to pay her mother. To pay for her school fees, she took a grant from the government and did private tutoring. After two years of full-time study she graduated and found a job as a teacher in a pre-vocational school. She considered herself to be very lucky to have had the chance to get so far in her education and had no thought of continuing, particularly as it was only those with the very best examination results who could get into university in those days.

As time went by she met her future husband and, while making plans to get married and have children, she switched to primary school teaching. Two years later, her first daughter, Joanne, was born. Three years later her second daughter, Tiky, became a member of their family. Mabel thought that she would devote her life to looking after the two girls, hoping to give them a healthy upbringing different from her own.

However, her plans changed when she saw a newspaper advertisement for a degree course for primary school teachers at the Open Learning Institute (now the Open University of Hong Kong). She consulted a close classmate who worked there about whether or not she should apply. Her classmate explained the trends in education and persuaded her to think about studying in order to get more formal qualifications. However, as the deadline for the application approached she had a lot of worries:

> I had not studied for so long — could I catch up? I was nearly 40 — would it be too late? My elder daughter was in her fifth year of primary school — should I spend more time with her to help give her every chance of earning a place in a better secondary school? Would my husband support me? Would there be any financial problems?

When she finally discussed it with her husband, he was not against her doing it, but was not really in favour either, and he cautioned that she must not neglect the two children because of her studies. A further worry was that she was living with her mother-in-law, who complained that she should be spending her time at home, not studying. But eventually she decided to set herself a time limit of six years and to start with just one subject, child development, that would be helpful to her as a mother as well as a teacher.

When she first began her new studies she panicked. She had no idea how to start the first assignment. She also had a lot of opposition from her mother-in-law, who looked down on her because of her childhood background, and who tried to turn the children against her by telling them constantly that "Mummy was not really going out to study; she was going out to play."

Fortunately, Mabel was not shy about asking others for help with her difficulties: "I approached some of my classmates and suggested that we form a study group to help and support each other." They studied together, often in Mabel's home so that her children could see the true situation — that she really *was* studying. "Being a member of this group made my studying easier and I finished my Bachelor of Primary Education degree in four years rather than in the six that I had planned."

Besides the support of her study group, she created many ways to encourage herself. She kept some time for relaxation through singing Chinese opera. As well, she pampered herself a bit by buying herself a nice gift every time she had a good exam result. She also encouraged her two daughters to be involved in her studying, for example by promising them that if she scored more than 70 marks for an assignment they

would have a reward by all going to eat at McDonald's. The girls provided a lot of support and encouragement, and they looked forward to opening the envelope with her whenever examination results arrived.

One impressive experience was on the day of her first exam when she was very nervous and found that everything she had studied seemed to have disappeared from her memory. She shared her feelings with the girls. They comforted her by offering their own primary school experiences, "It's okay Mummy; don't be afraid. All you have studied will come back after the first two minutes of feeling 'blank' in the exam. Good luck!" This was really a great encouragement to her and the girls' advice proved to be sound.

Mabel once came close to giving up her studies when she had to spend three nights working overnight to complete an assignment because she was so busy with her job. It was midnight. The weather was very cold. Her husband and children were enjoying their sleep in their warm beds. She was full of self-pity, and she wept. She asked herself, "Life is steady now. Why not just spend the time to play and to learn things just for interest?" However, by morning, after she had finished the assignment, she felt satisfied. "I am doing something to upgrade myself and it is worth making some sacrifices," she comforted herself.

Mabel's studying had some good effects on others. "My daughters were nine and six when I started, and by watching me study they developed their own good habits. Now, at ages 13 and 10, their learning is active and they can handle their work independently without supervision." And although her mother-in-law has still not changed her opposition to women being educated, Mabel believes that in her heart she has new respect for what Mabel has achieved. Some of her colleagues, secondary schoolmates and her niece were also influenced by her example and are now enrolled in university courses. Her husband is now very happy and proud of her achievement, and he is also considering doing some study by distance education.

For Mabel, personally, her degree has meant a promotion to a senior teaching position in her school. More importantly, she has a new, broader point of view for looking at things. She hadn't thought about promotion when she started the course, but it has been a nice outcome. As she said, "Once you've learned and completed something, it's in your brain and nobody can take it away from you."

The advice that Mabel gives to other women is this:

> If you want to study to fulfil your ideals it is very important to take that first step. Then make a good plan of your time to allow your studies, work and family to all have enough attention, so that complaints and arguments can be minimised. In the past the status of women such as my mother was low. If there were any changes to her life she could not handle them; they would have adverse effects on her children, and this in turn contributes to the increasing number of problem children that affect society. As we know nowadays there are changing trends in society. Men and women are regarded as equal. Besides, people are becoming less tolerant, and marriage is not as long-lasting. Women need to protect themselves so they can be strong enough to face changes and handle them independently. So do not miss any chances for further studying in order to upgrade yourself or broaden your mind.

**ESTHER CHAN SHUK-FONG: SINGLE PARENT**
**Margaret Taplin**

Esther grew up in a very disharmonious family and she didn't have a happy childhood. Her father was the main breadwinner, and he had to support two families because his brother had passed away. You can imagine how difficult it was for him to support so many people (15) on his own during the 1950s to 1960s. Esther's parents' marriage did not work out well, which had a significant impact on Esther and her brothers and sisters. Esther's eldest brother had to start working right after he finished secondary school to help relieve the father's financial burdens. All of the children had to work part-time in order to continue their education.

Esther worked at her first job during the summer break before she moved to secondary school when she was just 12 years old. She was a storekeeper, selling drinks and food. She had to stand up from 7:45 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. with no breaks and no holidays. She was paid HK$80 (about US$10) a month, of which $60 was given to her mother. Since then, she has never stopped working in part-time jobs. She counts herself as lucky because, being the youngest child, she did not have to earn to support the family. However, she has had a tough life for many, many years.

In order to escape from the disharmony of the family, Esther got married at the age of 22, even though she knew the man she was marrying might not be the right person for her. Since she always dreamt of having a happy family and home for herself and her children, she started her family as soon as she got a stable job. Unfortunately, her marriage did not last long. She broke up with her husband a few years after they were married. She feels very sorry for not giving her children a harmonious family life and protecting them better, and that is why she does her best to compensate them. In addition, she had always dreamt of having a degree. Subconsciously, she felt very unfulfilled and was always looking for courses to enrol in. Because of her work and family commitments, distance education suited her the best. She began her part-time education in 1989, and she finally got her first degree in 1999.

At first Esther was cautious about whether she could cope with studying alone at a distance, so she enrolled in two elementary programmes. She found that she could manage, so she selected some social sciences subjects that interested her the most and made a plan to finish her bachelor's degree in three or four years.

It wasn't easy! For some of her subjects, such as European history, she had no previous background. Even though her standard of English is good, it is not her mother tongue, so there were difficulties with studying in that language. She recalls:

> If the tutor for any course was not supportive, then the students had to solve problems for themselves. My solution was to ask other students in my tutorial groups if they would like to form study groups. Out of 11 courses that I studied, I was able to set up study groups with fellow students in three of them. This was one of the main reasons for my survival. In fact, even though I have now graduated, I have kept in contact with one of the groups and continue to help them to complete their studies. Another reason for my survival was that I constantly reminded myself that I had made the commitment to do the programme. Nobody was forcing me, so it was up to me to put in the effort.

During the time that she was studying, Esther went through more difficulties than many people experience in their whole lives. Most of them came from her job, but she could not leave her job as she needed a steady income to support her family. As a single parent living alone with her two children, a son who was 11 and a daughter who was two when she started her course, she was the one who had to make decisions and face financial difficulties. She felt that there was always a triangle: her job (causing workload and personnel problems but necessary for her income), her family (children and their problems) and her education (important for her personal goals and to upgrade herself). She needed to put in so much effort in order to balance the triangle.

> It is quite certain that I must work very hard to keep my employment, to keep a steady income for my children. I ought to be a good mother for my children because I want to compensate them for my divorce from their father, but I always emphasise to my children that our family is as complete as others. They are being raised as well as other children, and sometimes they have got much more than other children. The only thing we are missing in the family is a male adult. Personally, I feel that problem children may not come from broken families but from families in which their parents do not care about their children enough. Therefore, I am always available for my children whenever they need me. All of my personal life is given to my children. I must spend a vacation with them at least once a year. Besides the routine work, I spend all of my time with my children. This helps me to strike the balance between my work and my family.

Not surprisingly, Esther was not able to be a particularly hard-working student, as she could only manage to squeeze one full day per week or sometimes only one per fortnight for her studies. This was usually a Sunday, and she would go to the university library from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sometimes she would pay her domestic helper to look after the children, and sometimes she would ask friends to help. At home, she would study from midnight until 3 a.m. about three times a week.

There was a time when Esther came close to giving up. In early 1997 she was trying to juggle three subjects, and her company changed the organisational structure, making her leader of a group of 17 staff members, all of whom had higher qualifications than hers. She was under a lot of pressure both from work and from her studies. To make it even worse, her daughter's health was poor at that time. As well, her son was 13, not enjoying school, and going through a typical "teenage crisis," and she was having financial problems which meant she had to get a loan from the university. That year she had a very unpleasant experience two days before her examination for a 20-credit subject. She had to consult a doctor and take medicine to calm herself down. The doctor advised her not to do the examination because she was in such a bad state, but she did it anyway and managed to pass. To deal with the negative impact of the incident, she was under treatment for six months and the horrible memory has never left. "I need to be tough and must not be defeated. I was not born to be a tough person but my personal experiences have trained me to be — not because I can't bear to lose, but because I must protect my children well since they have nobody except me. Without me, who is going to do this?"

She kept going with her studies for two reasons:

> First, I had made the commitment to myself to finish the course. Also, I could not afford to set an example of quitting for my son because of the problems he was experiencing with his own schooling. I knew it was important for him to see me trying my best in spite of the difficulties. Now that he is older and has gone overseas to continue his own studies, he says that I was a good role model, teaching him perseverance.

Esther's son has this to say about his mother's studying:

> Originally, I did not have much feeling about my mother's education. I had seen her doing her homework at midnight. She is a very hardworking person; she spends most of her time working. She is very busy at work and she seldom calls home. She does not go out very often. She comes home after she finishes work. She is very strict with me and my younger sister especially about our education. But I know she cares about us because she wants us to do well in school. Sometimes, I felt that she was not too understanding because she could not accept my failure in school. Since I left Hong Kong for the U.K., I began to understand more about her concerns because it is too important to my future. I know one thing: I cannot work as hard as my mother. Therefore, I must try my best to finish a degree before I start working. I don't want to work full-time and study part-time. It is not fun. I know my mother enjoys studying but she paid out a lot in terms of money and time. It is tough.
>
> I was proud of her when I saw her in the newspaper last year. I think my mum must have done something good. We received many calls on that day. I personally do not object to her continuous education, but I think you should stop at some point to enjoy life.

Fortunately, Esther's son was old enough to understand the importance of her studying. While he didn't particularly encourage her, he didn't really object or feel unhappy, and didn't make her feel guilty. However, because her daughter was so much younger and very attached to her mother, there were times when Esther did feel guilty and felt that she had to spend more time with the child. She made certain to include some special family time in her plans. Her brothers and sisters often said to her, "Why do you want to work so hard? Why not just spend the time with your children?" But she told them that her daughter's health problems were not the outcome of her studying, and her son's teenage problems were not a consequence of her studying. Of course, her children would always be her first priority and she would never ignore them. But on the other hand, with careful management, it was possible to be a good mother as well as being a student.

As far as her career was concerned, there were direct benefits as the result of her studying. Six months before she completed her course she was given a promotion, partly because she was so close to completing her degree. But it was the sense of self-fulfilment, of personal growth and the increased ability to see things more broadly that were the main benefits for her. And she believes she has gained much more than just the degree. She has also made some very good friends with the members of her study groups. She has learned better time-management skills, is better able to face problems and deal with difficulties in a more systematic manner and has greater confidence in talking to people. Apart from the benefits to her son of her role modelling, her experiences have also influenced about 12 of her friends or colleagues to enrol in their own studies.

Esther's advice to other women who are considering going back to study is to be as well-prepared as possible. She talks about the "three preparations": financial, family and self. There are a lot of expenses, including fees and books, so she advises saving some money before starting. Preparing the family is the most difficult for women because they usually have a double duty. It is very difficult if the husband does not support his wife's studies, or even if the children do not, so they must understand that the benefits will be not just for the woman but for the family. "You will be able to help them financially, and you will be able to help them with their own lives because you will have a wider base of knowledge and skills to draw on."

Esther also advises:

> You should prepare yourself by getting as much information as possible about the courses before you choose. Try to anticipate if you think you will be able to make it within the time. Is the course too difficult? Maybe you need to consider another course rather than the one you first look at. Once you have checked out all this information and you think it's all right and you enrol, don't give it up. Keep trying. Even if you fail an exam, even if you score a marginal or a very low grade, it doesn't matter, but you have to tell yourself you achieved something. Don't be too worried about any lack of support from friends or relatives — just totally ignore them as long as you know what you want and try to fulfil it. Don't ever think that because you quit your education a long time ago you can never come back! The doors are always open whenever you're able to take the opportunity.
>
> I enjoy studying because I can leave the routine to do something interesting. I can stay away from thinking about work, people at work and my family during the moments when I can sit in the lecture hall learning something with other students. I enjoy school life and studying in the library. I am longing for a big piece of grassland in the university like I have seen in movies set on university campuses. I see education as a kind of pleasure. Of course, the grades and the certificates are the rewards for my efforts on the assignments and examinations, but it is more important to get pleasure from learning. I really want to share this feeling with others. I hope that they also see education or learning as a kind of pleasure. Learning to relax may result in better achievements in terms of knowledge and grades.
>
> Apart from pleasure, another gain has been in developing time-management skills. I've learnt how to make use of my time in order to manage my responsibilities. Of course, my family will always come first. I must sacrifice my rest time in order to fulfil my obligations to the triangle.

## LYDIA CHEUNG: OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

**Margaret Taplin**

"She is a graduate of the Open University of Hong Kong!," Lydia's husband often says proudly in front of people. "You set a very good example to Chris. He is proud of your achievement. He appreciates and admires your being hardworking without complaint," Lydia was told one day by one of her son's teachers.

Lydia left school in the middle of sixth form 13 years before she started her degree at the Open University (OUHK), because her family was unable to afford to send her to a private university, and she did not think her results would be good enough for a place in a public one. She started working as a typist in the Hong Kong Government. When the freshness and excitement subsided after working for only two months, Lydia found typing work was dull and lacked challenge. She desperately wanted to change her job.

Two years later, she became a general clerk, still in the employment of the Hong Kong Government. The change gave her little satisfaction, but there was a small comfort as the salary was higher. Soon she

married and a year later gave birth to her son, Chris, and her life changed again. At the age of six weeks, Chris was admitted to hospital with a high fever and difficulty in breathing. After many tests, his doctors could not find the reason for the problem, and no treatment could be given to him other than permanently putting him into a tent full of pure oxygen. They could just wait and hope for Chris to grow stronger. But this waiting period was torturous, and to reduce the trauma of the experience, the doctors suggested that Lydia should stay with him in the hospital during the day. Otherwise, they feared that Chris would become confused and would forget who his mother was.

Lydia took unpaid leave from her job. It became a routine for her to go to the hospital early every morning when her husband went to work. In the evening after work, her husband would come to visit them and accompany Lydia back home after 10 p.m. when Chris was asleep. Lydia's husband was very supportive and attentive. He shared her anxiety and worries and she could not think how she would cope if she were on her own. But still, there were always critical moments when Chris had to struggle for life and Lydia was on the verge of collapsing.

When Chris was six months old, it was found that there was an inoperable lymphangioma inside his trachea which obstructed his airway and was the main reason for his difficulty in breathing. At eight months a tracheotomy tube was inserted to enable him to breathe easily and to grow stronger. By 18 months he was as normal as any other child, except that he had to stay in the hospital for the maintenance of the tracheotomy tube and therefore lacked a normal home environment.

Giving intensive care to Chris and constantly worrying about his health, Lydia suffered neurasthenia. She found it difficult to sleep at night and her heart raced fast whenever she suddenly heard a sound, even it was a soft one. There was a time she dared not fall asleep because she felt she was paralysed in all four limbs once she fell asleep. She was afraid she would not be able to get up again. Fortunately, when Chris was three-and-a-half, his trachea was closed as he had grown enough that the lymphangioma no longer blocked his airway too much. He returned home and started kindergarten, and Lydia resumed work in the employment of the Hong Kong Government. However, Chris was still in fragile health and suffered with asthma. There were many times when Lydia and her husband had to rush him to hospital during the night. Yet, compared with his previous physical condition, Chris had improved so much that Lydia could relax a bit.

As the years passed, Lydia found herself feeling trapped by her life. It was not that she didn't love her husband and son. On the contrary, she couldn't think of living without them. In fact, in bringing up their son, Lydia found how supportive and caring her husband could be, and how important her son was to her.

Perhaps it was the subsequent relatively uneventful years of her life that made Lydia feel restless. She took Chris to the clinic for regular check-ups. It was not a tiresome job and Lydia loved to do it. In fact, chatting with doctors and nurses about Chris was an enjoyable experience for Lydia as they were all fond of him. Yet she could not fathom what exactly it was that she wanted to escape from, or what she wanted to get. Or rather, she was ambivalent. She did know that she did not want to work as a general clerk, since this gave her no satisfaction at all. But the salary did support her own living if not her family's. Lydia had always been a woman who believed a wife should be financially independent of her husband. She had read a lot of tragic stories in the newspapers about poor housewives suddenly found helpless by the unexpected death of their husbands who were the only breadwinners. Lydia always had her family in mind. Therefore, she treasured having a reasonably well-paying job. But still, she wanted to be doing something that she really wanted to do; to have her own space, her own world during her leisure time to

compensate for and balance the monotony of everyday life. But what could fulfil this desire without interrupting her family life?

When OUHK first opened in 1989, Lydia saw the opportunity to escape from her feeling of being trapped, and she was one of the 60,000 hopeful students who queued up to try to secure one of 4000 places. Unfortunately she did not get a chance to enrol then, but she started the following year. She enrolled in a non-credit course, English for Academic Purposes. She chose this because she did not think her written English was very good, and she wanted to be able to write as well in English as she could in Chinese. From the start of the course she felt a sense of the freedom she had been craving. She was able to do something for herself but, at the same time, distance education gave her flexibility so that when family matters arose it didn't matter because she didn't have to worry about missed classes.

When she started her first course, Lydia had no expectations about doing a degree, although when, in her first tutorial, she was asked what she hoped to gain from OUHK she wrote, "I want to become a graduate." In this course Lydia was the most hardworking student and was, in fact, the only one to complete all 18 of the essays that were set. By the end of the course, her English had improved a little but she still felt that it was inadequate, so she decided to continue. She took one course after another, step by step, for the first two years. It was only later, when she developed confidence, that she took two or even three at one time. Eventually, six years later, she did indeed become a graduate, with a degree in Western Arts and Humanities.

Despite the freedom studying gave her, it was still not easy for Lydia. She wanted so badly to improve her English that she utilised every moment to read. She would read while she was waiting for the bus, in the supermarket queue, waiting for the food to be cooked in the kitchen, on outings in the park with her husband and son, travelling by plane and in their hotel room when the family was on summer vacation. She would just grab as many moments as she could. Because of this constant reading, she developed chronic neck pain. She was working during the day and studying at night, and her schedule reinforced the neck pain until it became so bad that she could not even hold a pen. She took a month's break from her studies and her husband asked her to give up altogether. At that time she really wanted to die. She was torn with conflict because she liked to study so much but her physical condition did not allow her to do so. She tried physiotherapy and swimming, which helped a bit, and she used a bookstand to relieve the strain on her neck. She set an alarm clock to remind herself to take a short break after every 30 minutes of reading. Because she was so interested in the course she was doing at that time (Fifth Century Athens), she didn't want to give up, so she just kept on with it. The neck pain lasted for two years and became particularly bad whenever she had to write non-stop for three hours during an exam. Even now she is still suffering, but she definitely believes it has been worth making the sacrifice.

The personal benefits for Lydia from her studies at OUHK, apart from knowledge and self-confidence, are that she has gained a wider vision and looks at things in different perspectives rather than just from one side. She has also learned, through her studies, to be tolerant and to value other people's opinions, where previously she was argumentative and was described by her colleagues as "obstinate." She has had career benefits as well, as she has been promoted from general clerk to law clerk. Chris, her beloved son, looks to her as a good example and has aspirations to earn a degree. Her husband, who earlier had asked her to quit for her own sake, now always talks about her with pride in front of other people. Her brothers also encouraged her a lot with her studies and, in turn, she inspired her younger brother to study at OUHK as well.

Lydia says that she would certainly encourage other women to study by distance education:

> I do understand that we women put our families as our first priority and feel duty bound to our family obligations. To avoid our husbands blaming us, we have to manage our households first before we take our studies. Therefore, we must take every moment we can – even when we take our children to activities, we can read while we are waiting for them.

She mentioned a colleague who was trying to study at OUHK and to complete her degree in the minimum time. She was so rushed that she could not take it all in. She failed some examinations and had to re-sit them, or even take the courses again. "That's money wasted. At first, before you gain confidence and feel that you can manage, take your courses one by one. And we must take courses that we find interesting — if we are not so interested it becomes too easy for us to give up."

Lydia now has only 30 credits left to complete her second degree at OUHK, a Bachelor of Arts in Language and Translation. She is taking a break at the moment as she is waiting for the courses she finds the most interesting to open.

## LI HONG: NEW IMMIGRANT
**Elaine Kwok and Margaret Taplin**

Li Hong immigrated to Hong Kong from Beijing in 1990. Apart from a relative with whom she lived, she knew few people in Hong Kong. Because her Cantonese (the Chinese dialect used in Hong Kong) and English were poor at that time, she found it difficult to get a good job. Eventually she found a low-paying job with a stock brokerage company. She was very busy at work and did not have much spare time for social activities. She was unsatisfied with her life as it was lacking direction.

While searching the newspapers for better job opportunities, Li Hong realised that most required a degree. Although she had previously studied medicine in a Chinese Mainland university, her qualification was not recognised in Hong Kong. She decided that she had to get a degree in Hong Kong in order to find a better job. There were two ways for her to do this: one was to go for full-time education in one of the local universities; the other was to pursue part-time study with the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK), which at that time was the Open Learning Institute. For full-time study, she not only had to find enough financial resources to support herself but also needed to pass the entrance examination, which would be quite difficult for her as she had not attended high school in Hong Kong. Therefore, distance education with the Open University became the only viable choice for her.

When she enrolled at OUHK, Li Hong did not have many choices of courses because her English was not of the same standard as her Hong Kong counterparts. However, she likes Chinese literature very much, so she chose to study Chinese literature and philosophy.

The biggest challenge that Li Hong experienced during her studies was balancing her time between study and work. As her job was very demanding, it was hard for her to concentrate on her studies. Besides, she was also depending on achieving her degree without much support from her family, employer or friends.

She felt very lonely. She did have some contact with fellow students, but it was difficult to find time to meet them to discuss assignments.

Despite her difficulties, she never thought of giving up. Even midway through the degree, when she was experiencing the greatest pressure from her work, she would not consider giving up because she did not want to lose everything that she had already put into her studies. In the last two years she studied harder for two reasons: one was that by then she had gained more confidence in her ability, and the other was that she had seen an immediate goal for her study — to teach Putonghua (Mandarin, the national dialect of China, which is her mother tongue), since there was a shortage of native speakers available to teach it in Hong Kong. By this time she had also set herself the target to pursue a master's degree after her first degree. Finally, she achieved an upper-second class for her honours degree in Arts, which was also the highest level achieved by her classmates.

In reflecting on her study experience, Li Hong emphasised the importance of effective time-management:

> When I look back now on doing the assignments, I usually did them only one or two days before they were due. I realised that since I did not spend enough time on doing assignments I didn't lay a good foundation in certain subjects I studied. I have to re-read those courses nowadays in preparing for my master's study. Laying a good foundation is very important.

Now that she has her degree, Li Hong has found a job teaching Putonghua in a university at a considerably higher income than she had ever received before. Another benefit has been the growth of her self-confidence as the result of having supported herself solely and depended on herself in achieving her degree. She also developed her independent thinking and analytical skills because she had to solve many problems by herself. When she first arrived in Hong Kong she didn't have many friends, but now she has many because her new job has enabled her to join the teachers' union and various other professional associations. Now, her family is very proud of her and her friends envy her success. She said:

> I have really felt good about myself in the last three years since graduation. I am confident that I will be able to solve most of the problems I will encounter from now on, as I had the experience of solving various difficult problems on my own. When I read now, I am able to grasp the main points quickly because the literature and philosophy courses have trained me well. I was recently married to a fellow university professor and my husband is very proud of my achievement, too. Before, my life was lacking a goal, but now I know exactly what I want for my life.

Li Hong offers the following advice to future students: "Keep up with regular daily reading; try to do all the supplementary reading; do not leave the assignments until the last minute; and remember that classmates can be as helpful as tutors — do not hesitate to approach your classmates for help." She also advises future students to save enough money before enrolling so that money does not become an obstacle that hampers future study, as she thinks it is dangerous to have interruptions in study: "I think it's best to continue the studying process, otherwise one would give excuses not to study and it would delay the process of getting the degree." In addition, she thinks that it is very important to get support from the family, especially for married women with children.

In conclusion, Li Hong said:

> Life is so short really. Thus one must find a meaning for life and push oneself hard to achieve a goal. Actually it's not so difficult to get a degree as long as one is willing to give up something

that is not essential. For example, watching one less TV programme is no big deal because you don't gain much from watching it. On the contrary, within that one hour or so, you may be able to read many pages. So set yourself a goal to study for a degree, even though you may not know what will happen in the future, but at least you've tried and you have not been wasting your time. As you get old, you really have to think about how to live the rest of your life. If you earn a degree now, you will somehow be able to save a bit for future use. As you look back on your life, you will not have regrets. Of course, one should not over-pressurise oneself in study, as success takes time.

**Conclusion**

The four stories presented here confirm that even though on the surface women in Hong Kong do not have any obstacles to their studying, there are still some "hidden" difficulties they need to overcome. One of these is the need to make their children their first priority and to fit their studies in around their children's needs. This can often mean sacrificing activities or even sleep to fit the studies in particularly if, as in Lydia's case, the child has special needs. There is also a suggestion that there can still be opposition from family members, as in the case of Mabel's mother-in-law and Li Hong's family in Mainland China. All of the Hong Kong women appear to be very strong in character, as is evidenced by their ability to manage their time and cope with their multiple roles and personal adversities as well as allowing for some time for their own relaxation. Another sign of their strength is their strong perseverance and determination to succeed in achieving the goals they set for themselves. This determination helped them to persist through the difficult times.

Two of the women expressed their initial fears that they would not be able to cope with the work, but these were put to rest once they started their courses and found that some of their classmates were other women just like them. And all referred to the sense of freedom they experienced through their studies. For two women, Esther and Mabel, forming study groups with their classmates was an important strategy to help them through. For all of the women, their studies have brought about career-related rewards such as promotion, but the main benefits have been in their personal growth and the way they have been able to inspire their children, friends or colleagues to further their own education. All are unhesitating in saying that they would advise other women to follow their examples.

# INDIA

**Introduction**

The 1991 census tells us that only 39.9% of Indian women are literate. Women's participation in higher education rose from around 9% in 1947/48 to 34% in 1995/96. Of these, 59% opted for arts, 26.75% for commerce, 11% for education and only 2.5% enrolled in science courses (Mani, 1989). According to a University Grants Commission (UGC) Report (1976) there are 29.6% women in college-based courses, whereas in correspondence courses there are 34.3%. Clearly distance education is preferred by women. Why? It is particularly suitable for Indian women for two main reasons: first, as no classroom attendance is required, there is no need for the woman learner to dislocate herself and, second, because of the degree of flexibility in course completion the learner can adjust her study timetable within her schedule of household responsibilities. Moreover, in India, distance education is cost-effective; a learner pays only a third of the total fees of a conventional institution.

The women featured in this section were selected on the basis of participation in vocational academic and professional programmes, representation of disadvantaged groups (such as the physically challenged or educationally and locationally disadvantaged) and being members of the poor, middle-class and upper middle-class sections of society. Anuradha Datt was widowed and so needed to obtain formal qualifications for her employment while working and raising her two young children alone. Jyoti Mendiratta is a gifted student but suffers from a physical disability which made it difficult for her to participate in conventional education. Shanta is an older student who grew up in a rural village and married young. After her husband's death, she saw her distance education studies as a way to become the champion of other women in her village. Seema Pal studied for an M.B.A. while learning to adjust to life with her husband's family and looking after a new baby. Sophy was from a working class family and missed her first chance at education when she fell into bad company, but later joined a religious order and needed to balance her studies with her other duties.

## ANURADHA DATT: TOWARDS SELF-RELIANCE

**Asha S. Kanwar**

Thirty-nine-year-old Anuradha is the mother of two growing children. As a carefree young girl from a well-to-do family, Anuradha went to the posh Air Force Bal Bharti School in New Delhi. She later graduated from the prestigious Lady Shri Ram College with economics and political science. Her father, a bank officer, had given his daughter a good education but he, like other conservative Indian fathers, believed that marriage, not a career, was to be his daughter's destiny. And so young Anuradha was married to a bright and upcoming officer of the Indian Postal Service.

The marriage was an arranged one, as is the general custom. Anuradha had seen her husband just once and that just three days before the engagement ceremony. After that the young officer went back to his Kolar posting and they communicated through letters. The wedding approached and Anuradha's fiancé categorically stated that he would take nothing by way of dowry. In other cultures this may not be such a startling statement, but in India, especially among the middle class and especially among members of the bureaucracy, expectations of a substantial dowry at marriage are *de rigueur.* That is the occasion when members of the groom's family make unreasonable demands of gifts for themselves and their relatives as a matter of right. Naturally, Anuradha entered a state of matrimony with both respect and admiration for the stranger, her husband.

She accompanied her husband on his postings first to Kolar Goldfields, then Bangalore and finally to Delhi, where her two children were born. From Delhi, the family moved for a year to the U.S. where her husband completed a master's degree in public administration at Harvard University. While there, Anuradha worked in a small nursery school, happy with her life and her family. When they returned to Delhi, Anuradha's husband was handpicked to serve as a director in the prime minister's office.

All was wonderful until that fateful day in March 1998 when Anuradha's husband developed a persistent fever, which was diagnosed as leukaemia. In spite of fervent prayers and hopes for a miraculous recovery, nothing happened. The little family was shattered. Anuradha and her children prayed very hard for his recovery. She herself took to keeping three fasts a week. Her daughter undertook to recite the Mahamrityunjaya, mantra, and her son, a class IV student, religiously went at 6 a.m. to the temple to perform the Mahashivabhilok for 40 days in the hope that their papa would get well. Whatever efforts, both material and religious, that were within the power of this afflicted band were taken up in the hope of saving their loved one. Anuradha took care of him for three months in hospital: "His cancer had made him slightly paralytic and I knew how to feed him — he didn't accept food from anyone but me."

Six weeks later Anuradha found herself a shattered and bewildered widow. "How will I feed my kids? What will happen?" were the questions that plagued her waking hours. In addition to this worry for the future, Anuradha had to face the nastiness of her in-laws. Anuradha recalls that just minutes after her husband died, her sister-in-law told her mother not to cry as she had to look after Anuradha and her children. The mother-in-law shot back, "Let her look after her rubbish herself." During the initial 13 days of mourning, her in-laws moved into the house. Anuradha needed money but no help was forthcoming. She had to direct the servant to stock up rations for the guests, pay all the bills herself and organise the daily business of living when all she wanted to do was to be alone with her children and cope with her loss. She couldn't bear to sit in the drawing room, and burst into tears each time a new guest arrived.

For a person who had always lived a comfortable life, the harsh reality was difficult to accept. She was not trained for any job but some people were kind. Her husband's colleagues helped her get a job as the officer-in-charge of a small library in the prime minister's office. Anuradha decided to get a formal qualification so that she would do her job well, so she enrolled in a bachelor's degree programme in Library Science. Says Anuradha "I didn't want to be mediocre."

While pursuing her studies, her children were already in class VII and VIII and could be left on their own. She also had a maid to take care of them and she made sure the servant was on call while she was away. But in spite of domestic help, certain chores like clearing bank accounts and financial business fell to her alone.

Anuradha had to attend counselling sessions every Saturday and later every Saturday and Sunday, so she learned to drive, practising on an old gypsy (jeep) which her brother loaned to her. She missed her counselling sessions only when she had to attend the parent-teacher meetings in her children's school. She was determined to do well and she felt she must attend all sessions. Her mother-in-law found all this highly suspect: "Where does she go? Who knows?" she would taunt.

When the mother-in-law was dying in hospital, Anuradha was taking care of her children who had come down with chicken pox. Her sister-in-law telephoned her saying "It's not my responsibility to look after her. She is your mother-in-law. Remember, no perks without responsibility. You won't get the house unless you look after her." Instead of getting the sympathy and comfort she needed, all Anuradha got was rudeness.

Some time later, when her mother-in-law died, she left Anuradha money, but by then she didn't really need it. When she had needed it, it was not offered to her. Her sister-in-law had signed a legal document that she would not lay claim to the family house. But after her mother's death, she not only took away all valuables from the house, she also locked the first and second floors, leaving only the ground floor for Anuradha and her children.

During this whole traumatic time of personal loss and a new orientation to her own responsibilities, Anuradha acknowledges the constant support and encouragement of her parents, friends, and husband's colleagues. But the lack of support from her in-laws made things difficult. They did not appreciate the steps she was taking to become self-sufficient and independent. Each of her efforts was greeted with nasty comments that were emotionally debilitating. For the sake of giving her children a normal and happy childhood, Anuradha refused to succumb to any harassment. Anuradha wept in the confines of her bedroom, but in front of her children she was cheerful. She told them, "I know I can't take the place of your father, but your lives will not change. I will give you everything that you are used to having."

Anuradha was coming back to her studies after a gap of 16 years. Doing her first set of assignments was difficult. She wanted her assignments to be the best and so she would borrow reference material and books from libraries. After dinner, Anuradha would sit down to study and she worked late into the night. She even took a week off to complete her assignments. The advent of exams triggered off further nervousness and uncertainty. "Will I fail?" wondered Anuradha, and she again took leave from work to study. Luckily, she cleared her exams.

The degree helped Anuradha take hold of her life. Initially, she didn't understand the jargon her colleagues used in meetings, but her course of study changed all that. Moreover the library she worked in was very interesting. For example, the earlier prime minister Smt. Indira Gandhi had contributed a lot of books that were stored without classification. As the library was being systematised, Anuradha sat with the consultants and learned the whole system of classification. Along with this practical experience, she also felt that her knowledge was improving with each course that she studied. Armed with a bachelor's degree in Library Science, Anuradha felt more confident with a sense of a secure future. Whereas earlier, any letter addressed to her as "librarian" caused a pang of guilt because she was only an officer-in-charge, now she no longer felt diffident about being identified as a librarian. She is now continuing her professional education and doing a master's degree in Library Science. She believes this will give her career a boost and she will be able to perform her duties even more efficiently.

When asked to give advice to other women, Anuradha says:

> Mine is a special case. I was totally unequipped for a job. Like girls from other conservative families, I did my B.A. and got married. I depended first on my family and then on my husband for everything. My husband and I were very religious — we thought nothing bad would happen to us — such things only happened to other people. But anything can happen. Suddenly, you can lose your partner or anything else may happen. You have to be prepared for any eventuality. A professional programme really helps. My degree has proved very useful. I am doing my master's now, after which I will do a course in computers related to library science. I already did a basic five-week computer crash course during the five months I stayed at home after my husband's death. Distance education has helped me rebuild my life. I can take care of my children and give them the education and facilities that my husband and I had hoped they would have. Distance education courses can help you too — and any effort spent in studying is really worthwhile, believe me.

## JYOTI MENDIRATTA: SURMOUNTING BARRIERS

**Asha S. Kanwar**

Jyoti was born and brought up in a middle-class family in Delhi. She is now 23 years old. The youngest of four children, Jyoti had three elder brothers, and all three doted on their little baby sister. She was a healthy child until she was six months old. Then her mother noticed a slight swelling on the first finger of the right hand. When the swelling persisted her parents consulted a doctor, who examined Jyoti and advised the parents not to worry as the swelling was probably due to a cold. However, the swelling spread to other fingers and limbs. Even so the little girl could walk about normally and was alert and naughty, like other children. At age three, when Jyoti was playing around the room, she saw a radio on the floor. She approached this interesting object and began fiddling with the knob. Her mother heard a loud cry. Jyoti had received a severe electric shock and even though she was saved, she could no longer stand up.

Then began a long series of medical examinations in Delhi and Jaipur. Wherever they heard of a renowned doctor, the anxious parents took the child to him. The doctors recommended surgery and the little child was put through a series of seven operations. When nothing happened, the parents decided that they would no longer allow their child to be treated as a human guinea pig. They decided to accept their lot and get on with life as best as they could.

Because she was unable to walk, school was an inaccessible dream for Jyoti. Her father was a senior maths teacher, but as school teaching is not a very lucrative profession in India, he supplemented the family income by giving part-time tuition. He decided to teach his daughter maths at home. When he taught her addition, she automatically understood subtraction and urged her father to move on. When he taught her multiplication, she had already deduced the principles of division. Jyoti was a very intelligent girl with a special aptitude for maths. Jyoti was equally gifted in language learning, and when her mother taught her the English and Hindi alphabets, she proved to be an apt student. Soon she was reading *Champak*, a children's magazine.

The National Open School (NOS) provided a ray of hope and Jyoti enrolled for schooling through the distance mode. The course materials that NOS provided were satisfactory and she had no difficulty negotiating them. She had no classes to attend and only went to a designated centre for taking her exams. Her father is proud of the fact that Jyoti scored 76% in her class X exam, and when she completed her class XII two years later in 1995, she got 84%. Now retired, Jyoti's father says, "Both Jyoti and her brother Deepak are physically handicapped. If it wasn't for distance education, my children wouldn't be able to get either school or university education."

On successfully completing her 10+2 with commerce subjects, it was only natural that Jyoti should think of continuing her studies and trying to graduate from the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). Jyoti says she chose to enrol at IGNOU over Delhi University, which offers a Bachelor of Commerce through correspondence, because her friends and relatives told her IGNOU course materials are the best. Jyoti discovered for herself that the materials were indeed good. She had to submit assignments and she didn't find any major problem completing them. Only twice she encountered some difficulty answering questions; on those occasions she went to her study centre in Shivaji College, also located in Delhi, where the counsellor was very helpful.

Of all her Bachelor of Commerce courses, Jyoti enjoyed studying Accounts and Income Tax the most. The only boring course was the Foundation Course on Humanities and Social Sciences. Says Jyoti, "This course was too theoretical and did not seem to have any practical application." Clearly Jyoti is not into the social sciences; her interest is in knowledge applications. Her parents and friends encouraged her to study so that she was able to complete her degree in three years. Jyoti says, "I study four to five hours every day — even on holidays." Little wonder then that she scored 66% in her degree.

IGNOU's certificate programme in Computing came next, and here too Jyoti scored 76%. While doing this course, Jyoti found the practical sessions most exciting. "The course on hardware was the best as that explained what the computer is and how it works," says Jyoti. On the other hand, the course on computer applications, which could have been more detailed, was not one of Jyoti's favourites. "I'm looking for a career in computers — software development to be precise," she says, which is why she is currently a student of the Master's in Computer Applications programme. She is in the first semester, and so far, she has decided that she likes courses with an application orientation best. She finds the theory a bit boring, but she says the course on C+language is very interesting.

Jyoti has to travel one hour each way, two to three times a week to attend her three-hour practical sessions. Her father drives her there and remains at the centre for the sessions. He says, "I have to hire a private car to take Jyoti and her brother for the computer lessons. It costs me Rs3000 a month, and as I have retired, my income is only Rs5500 a month. It is becoming difficult to make both ends meet. Can Jyoti be given a fee exemption?"

While his question cannot be answered immediately, Jyoti herself has won an award that will bring her Rs1000 a month. The National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People under the chairmanship of Smt. Sonia Gandhi, President of the Congress Party of India, has conferred the scholarship which will continue until Jyoti completes her programme of study. When Jyoti went to the award ceremony she was interviewed by the press. She asks, "Didn't you see my photograph in *Hindustan Times* and my picture on TV on Saturday?" Her friends and relatives had seen her and she received several congratulatory phone calls. This coverage gave her a great deal of encouragement to work hard to achieve her goals. She is full of determination in the pursuit of her studies.

As a child, Jyoti's handicap didn't bother her. She is deeply religious and believes that God does everything for the best. She is not religious in the ritualistic sense, nor does she set aside a special time for prayers but she does believe in a power above. This belief has helped her maintain a positive attitude to life. What she missed out in physical movement, she has made up for with her intelligence. But sometimes she does get hurt because of people's attitudes: "People pity me and I don't like it. They also don't expect me to complete my M.C.A. successfully and this bothers me." Jyoti doesn't pity herself and she wants others to treat her normally. She believes that education has made a difference to her life. She has become more independent and confident. Her self-esteem has gone up and she feels that people respect her for her achievements.

When studying for her class X, Jyoti met Divya, also a student in the class. Divya lived in the neighbourhood and went to regular school. But in her spare time, she visited Jyoti and the two girls discussed their studies and spoke of everything under the sun. Divya was a supportive and encouraging friend who went on to do her engineering degree from Manipal. She is married now and has moved to Bangalore with her husband. Jyoti stays in touch with her through e-mail. Jyoti currently has three friends in her M.C.A. class and their discussions range from studies to films. Even though she cannot accompany her friends to film shows at the cinema, she watches films on TV.

Jyoti loves reading and painting. She mostly reads women's magazines in her spare time such as *Sarita*, *Women's Era* and *Femina*. She is a very good artist whenever she chooses to pick up the brush. She usually paints landscapes on canvas or does fabric painting. She paints from available pictures and hopes to graduate to original painting some day. But right now, all her energies are focused on doing well in her studies. One of her brothers is a computer engineer in the U.S. He has seen her competence in programming and is convinced that she can have a promising career in computing in the U.S. Jyoti's receiving the award has further convinced him that his gifted sister could well be self-sufficient in the U.S., and she is planning to work towards this goal.

Right now Jyoti's life is one of tremendous possibility. But life has not always been so kind. One of her elder brothers committed suicide at 20 years of age, and the whole family was plunged into deep despair and gloom. Even so, Jyoti knew that it was better to count her blessings, however meagre they might appear, and move on. Jyoti focused her affections on Deepak, her 31-year-old brother, and they now share a close friendship.

Her message for potential women learners is this:

> If you have a clear goal in front of you, it is possible to achieve it, however difficult it might be. If women are working or have not had a chance to study, they can complete their education through the distance mode. I have found it very useful and I'm sure other women can also benefit from distance learning. Always remain positive in the face of hardship and all will be well.

## SHANTA: HOPES FULFILLED

**Shobhita Jain**

Shanta is 48 years old. In 1999, she completed a certificate programme of study in Participatory Project Planning at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). Her experience of studying for this course changed her image in both her own eyes and in the eyes of her family members.

Shanta was born in a village of Jharol Tahsil of Udaipur district in Rajasthan, India. Her parents died during an outbreak of cholera when she was 12 years of age, studying in class V in the village school. That was the end of her schooling. Two years later she was married off to a carpenter who lived 20 miles away from her own village. She lived in a joint family of 13 people. Her husband never enjoyed good health and therefore was not able to work hard at his job. He hardly ever had a regular job. Though Shanta could read and write, she never even thought of taking up a job. In the first 10 years of her married life she had five children. The first one did not survive for long. The other four are now grown up. Her eldest child, a son, married two years ago and his wife is now a mother of a four-month-old daughter. So now Shanta is a grandmother.

Shanta's husband died seven years ago. His family did not want Shanta's children and her to continue living with them, so she took the children to her brother's house where they lived for about a year. Shanta realised that her brother was not able to cope with the extra burden of having four extra children to feed, so she decided to go back to her husband's village. After some conflict, Shanta's brothers-in-law agreed to let Shanta and her children have a share of the land and house on the condition that she take the responsibility of looking after the widowed mother of her husband, who was 70 years old at that time.

In order to get a foothold and some support from land and other property, Shanta thought it wiser to let her mother-in-law live with her. Her children were also quite happy to have their grandmother living with them. It was, however, not easy to find enough money to subsist. Their plot of land was too small to yield enough food and the house was just a one-room hut for the six of them. Shanta took up whatever job she could get. For example, during the tendu leaf collection season, she joined the village women in leaf gathering. It was hard work giving very little money. Sometimes her children also helped to bring in a little more money.

One day, about three years after her husband's death, when Shanta had gone to collect tendu leaves, she came across a group of men and women from Astha, a non-governmental organisation (NGO). They were finding out about the kind of work village women did in collecting tendu leaves and what sort of money they got from the contractor for their labour. That night Shanta kept thinking about those men and women. She was surprised to see somebody being interested in this matter. She thought that they were agents of the contractor. The next day when they came back to talk to the village women, Shanta decided to listen carefully to all that they were saying. They told the women that the contractor was paying them too little. He was cheating them because the minimum wage for that kind of work was almost double what the women were paid. This made Shanta feel furious. She thought of all the money which was not being paid to her and with which she could do so much. She could send her children to school; she could get medicine for her ailing mother-in-law. Shanta decided to ask the people from Astha how she could get what was her due. But the Astha people did not return for another month. In the meantime she talked about this injustice among other women collectors of tendu leaves. They too agreed that they should do something about it, but they did not know what to do.

After a month when the Astha workers again visited the village, the women were more or less ready to do what they advised. But the workers said that first the women had to mobilise all tendu leaf collectors for a collective agitation and demand higher wages. They made it clear that it was not easy to stand up against the powerful contractor who had his close friends among the politicians and bureaucrats. This dampened the women's spirits. But Shanta did not want to give up so she offered her services for organising the tendu leaf gatherers. Astha employed her as a village level worker for this purpose. Since she was to get paid for this work, she put her whole time and energy to this cause. The NGO was quite happy with her

work. She expanded her area of work to adjoining villages also. She began to organise women's groups in several villages. They were not only concerned with fair wages for tendu leaf collections, but also other issues like women's savings account, better health services, immunisation for children and regular classes for school-going children, etc. Shanta has now been working for Astha for the last three years.

Shanta's eldest child, a boy now 21, has been farming on other people's land on a sharecropping basis. He never went to school but he has supported wholeheartedly his mother's idea of sending her two younger daughters to school. Her eldest daughter is mentally retarded and she does not go to school while the other two regularly attend their classes. They are quite bright and Shanta hopes that they will study further to become teachers.

After a time, Astha suggested to Shanta that she enrol in the IGNOU certificate programme in Participatory Project Planning. At first she did not understand how she could join a course of a university in Delhi while she lived in a village in Rajasthan. But her friend at Astha explained that she could study courses at home through distance education mode. Shanta had never heard anything like this before and therefore could not really visualise what this kind of study would be like. All the same, the idea of becoming a student excited her. She thought of her parents who had sent her to school with the dreams of making her a nurse. But Shanta did not tell anyone else in her family. She quietly filled out the application form, and one day at an Astha meeting in Udaipur she was told that she was a student of IGNOU and that she had an identity card of the university. The next month she was to attend the first interactivity camp of the certificate programme at Udaipur in which 30 other students were also to participate.

Shanta was quite excited when she reached the camp, even though she had no idea what it would be like. During the three-day camp, she met other development workers from different parts of south Rajasthan. They too were excited about the course, though none had a clear idea of its contents. On the first day, the faculty from IGNOU clarified any uncertainties they had and explained that the entire programme was to run in a participatory manner according to their own ideas about development activities in their areas. The participants were given course books and a diary, and the course facilitators sat with them and shared experiences of development work in rural areas.

For the remaining two days of the camp, the participants conducted each session by selecting teams of organisers. Shanta was elected in one such team. For two days they discussed the issues related to the degree and level of their participation in the development process and how they could mobilise people at the grassroots. Each of the team members had to select a topic for the fieldwork-based project. At the end of the six-month certificate programme, each had to present a project report, which was the final examination.

The very thought of reading the course books and writing the report made Shanta feel very nervous. She told her fellow learners that even though she was quite familiar with development work in the villages, this business of reading and writing was beyond her. However, there were quite a few like her among the participants, and they encouraged each other before parting company until the next interactivity camp two months later. Shanta went back home with her books and diary in her bag.

For a week or so after the camp, Shanta was too busy with household chores and almost forgot about her student status. But a newsletter from IGNOU woke her up to her new identity. She looked for her bag among the usual clutter of things in the house and found it under many clothes, bundles of papers and household knick-knacks. After finishing the day's chores, she took out the books and tried to read the first

few pages. But as she had not touched a book for a long time, she felt exhausted after going through just one page.

Shanta fell asleep, and after waking up she realised that she had read only two pages. She decided to find more time and devote at least one hour a day to reading the books. For a couple of days her mother-in-law took to watching her from a distance. Shanta remembers: "She concluded that I was the victim of some witchcraft to sit there staring at a book for so long."

The mother-in-law thought Shanta looked tired and worried, so she decided to confide in Shanta's daughters to reveal her fears to them. They became very scared and confronted their mother directly with many questions. After Shanta told them about her studies and being a student like them, they had a hearty laugh and went to explain the matter to their grandmother who was not still sure if she understood what was going on. But Shanta says her daughters were worse than grandmother. "They did not consider it possible for their mother to study books, write a diary and a report and pass an examination. They told me that studying at my age is not easy and that I should not cherish the dream of completing the course." That was a real challenge to Shanta. She vowed to complete her course come what may. In fact, that challenge gave her enough incentive to persevere and finish reading the books and write one page of the diary daily.

Shanta's project on leadership among tendu leaf collectors was quite close to her heart. She completed it and wrote a short report, which she presented in the last of the three interactivity camps of the programme. She passed her final examination with a B grade, while only expecting a C grade. Her daughters were, of course, overjoyed with their mother's performance. But unfortunately her old mother-in-law died only two months ago and she, like Shanta's own parents, is not there to bless her.

Shanta hopes that IGNOU will provide others with more opportunities for learning and making experiences more rich and useful for society. She says that the whole process of going through the certificate course took most of the participants by surprise. She says, "I never thought I could study and pass an examination. This has provided me with a very high level of self-confidence. With this newfound confidence, I will work with fresh zeal. Yes, education is liberating."

## SEEMA PAL: A DREAM REALISED

**Madhulika Kaushik**

Seema Pal was very happy and excited. She had just cleared her senior secondary board examination with flying colours with high percentages in science and mathematics. Seema had always been a bright student and wanted to pursue an engineering and technology programme, a very bold choice as far as her mother and elder relatives were concerned. As the third girl child in a family of four children, she was a bit unsure about the prospects of her future studies. In Haryana where Seema's family lives, socio-cultural attitudes towards women's education are not very positive, and a very large percentage of families like to see their girls married off in their late teens or early twenties. Seema's own mother was not very keen on Seema joining any professional programme. Added to the problem was that engineering colleges were co-educational, so Seema would have to study with boys and probably stay in a hostel on the campus. Discussions in the family centred around the theme that Seema, like her two elder sisters, should instead

join a girls' college for her graduation and then be married off around the time she completed her B.A. programme.

Seema could not contemplate her entire future as a housewife. While she wanted to get married and raise a family, that wasn't all that she wanted to do. She thought that if she could become an electronics engineer she could join an engineering company or an engineering consultancy firm where she could advise other entrepreneurs or manufacturers, suggesting solutions or keeping busy at a workstation trying to invent electronic devices. She did not know how she would attain all of that if she wasn't allowed to pursue her dream of attaining an engineering degree. Her youngest brother, himself a science student of class X, was her closest confidant and ally. She would often talk to him late into the night about how she would carry out interesting innovations in electronics if only she was allowed to study further in her desired field.

Seema finally decided to talk to her father directly, though her mother cautioned her against it. While Mr. Pal was very proud of her excellent marks and the high praise that she had received from her school teachers, he was unsure how his own relatives would react should Seema pursue an engineering programme, away from home in a predominantly male institution. At the same time, he did not want to dampen the spark of his brightest child. None of the girls in the family, however, had ever done something like what Seema wanted to do. The morning when, after his breakfast, he found Seema waiting to talk to him, he knew that he would have to decide soon. Seema told her father of her earnest desire to go in for the engineering programme, saying that it was this desire which had made her work late nights consistently when the rest of the children in the family slept. She assured her father that if she was allowed to get admission, she would study hard and would never do anything which could bring the family honour down. Her father, looking at her earnest young face, felt that he did not have it in him to bluntly say no to her. "She has been working hard," he thought. Should he go by the family norms or let her pursue her hard-earned chance?

Seema's father began some hesitant consultation with the family elders. Some were annoyed and angry, but unexpected support came from Seema's maternal grandfather who said it was time that being a girl did not translate into a bright student having to sacrifice her chance for a promising career. And after all, Seema would be the first lady engineer in the family, which should be a matter of pride.

It seemed that luck was finally on Seema's side. One of her first cousins was also an aspirant for the same engineering programme in the nearest government Engineering College, situated at Murthal. With Seema's father assuring that her cousin-brother would be able to take care of Seema while they pursued the programme, the family reluctantly agreed.

In her final year at college, the placement activity for students began in earnest and all her classmates got very busy preparing their resumes for corporate placements. Seema's parents, however, arranged a match for her. The boy in question, Narendra, was an aeronautics engineer working for Air India, the international official airline of India. He was an only son with three sisters and lived with his parents at Palwal, Haryana, and was posted at Delhi. Seema was now seriously worried about whether she would be able to pursue a career at all. After all, if she would be living with her in-laws, there would be expectations and duties that she would have to fulfil as a new (and only) bride in the family. It was with a lot of trepidation that she met Narendra.

Narendra was very pleased at the prospect that he, in contrast to most of his friends and relatives, was getting married to a girl who was as qualified as he was. When they met he was very impressed with

Seema's intelligence and poise. Seema raised the question of her desire for a proper career for herself. Narendra understood her aspirations, but also knew that it may not be immediately possible. He therefore assured Seema that as a new bride she may have to wait for some time before she could think about getting a full-time job, but that he himself was certainly with her and would do all that he could to get her into a fulfilling career. Seema had to be content with that, as having been raised in a conservative family herself, she knew she would have to adjust.

And adjust she had to. Being one of the younger children in her father's family, she had not realised the onus of responsibility that would come when she got married. When she came to live in her in-laws' house after marriage, she faced a very different atmosphere from her own home and certainly from the campus life that she had been used to. Narendra was posted at Delhi and so travelled there every day from Palwal. In Palwal, in-laws did not entertain the idea of servants coming into the homes to help; the women were expected to take care of the housework by themselves. Being the daughter-in-law, Seema was expected to cook and clean for the entire family, with some help from her sisters-in-law. Upon her arrival in the family, her mother-in-law became free of the responsibility of running the house though the authority was still to be hers. Still, the novelty of married life and Narendra's moral support kept Seema from being unhappy. Months flew by and soon Seema found that she was expecting a baby. While on the one hand she rejoiced along with the family, she could see her chances of starting her career slipping further and further away. She confessed these fears to Narendra who also did not know how they would manage to realise their plans.

It was during one late afternoon that Seema, while going through the newspaper, chanced upon the admission advertisement of the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) for their Management Programme. The programme offered admission to a modular, multiple-exit M.B.A. programme and was targeted at working supervisors and managers. The applicants needed to be graduates with management experience to be eligible for entry through an admission test. Technology graduates could, however, apply without the requirement of work experience. Seema was excited. She had heard about IGNOU but had never really considered it as a possibility for herself. This opportunity seemed like an answer to her prayers. With her child on the way, she could hardly hope to start a career immediately. She could, however, use this time to acquire a management degree, and by the time she completed the three-year programme, her child would be old enough to enable her to work. In addition, her options for a job would definitely multiply once she had an M.B.A. to augment her engineering degree. She could hardly wait for Narendra to come home from work.

When he returned, Narendra could immediately guess that something good was coming. Seema seemed cheerful and excited and positively bursting with news. As soon as they retired to their room, she brought forth the paper cutting and sat waiting expectantly as Narendra went through it. Narendra could see the promise that the programme offered for Seema. He agreed with her that instead of getting frustrated at not being able to work right away, it would be ideal for her to go through the programme and actually enhance her chances for a good job while she waited for her child to grow up a little. It now remained for her in-laws to agree to allow Seema to study further. Predictably, her mother-in-law reacted rather strongly as she thought that becoming an engineer was enough even for an ambitious woman, and she could not understand why, instead of looking forward to her impending motherhood and new role, Seema wanted to immerse herself in further studies. Her own daughters were content to stay at home after graduation and wait for their marriages to be finalised. Why couldn't Seema be more like other sensible girls? And then there was the issue of household responsibilities — how would these be managed if Seema went out to study? Women in their family did not work in offices for long hours along with men. And in any case, they did not need additional money — Narendra made enough! Slowly and patiently,

between them, Narendra and Seema explained that this programme did not require Seema to go and attend classes, that she would be able to look after the household responsibilities and still study in her spare time, that she could get out midstream if the programme became too much and get credit for the part that she did clear. Seema managed to get a very reluctant okay from her in-laws.

There were, however, further hurdles. IGNOU did not have a study centre in Palwal. Seema would have to choose Faridabad for her study centre, the town where her parents lived, and would need to travel there every time she wanted tutor support for the various academic services, like library or teleconference access. Still, looking at the various flexibilities offered in the programme, Seema thought it was an ideal opportunity that she simply must take up.

Seema became the proud mother of a girl in November in her parents' house as per the local custom. In the first week of January, she was called for her induction orientation. As she was still at Faridabad, she could easily leave her daughter in her mother's care to go and attend. Seema met all her tutors that day and got to understand the system better. Though counselling through tutors was provided for every course during weekends, it was not mandatory for learners to attend. The study material was by itself enough for a given course, so she did not have to buy other reference material. There were, however, library resources at the study centre that she could refer to. As it was an open learning programme, the onus of keeping schedules of assignment submission, going through the material and preparing herself, as well as submitting the requisite examination forms in time, was on Seema herself. The counsellors were available at the study centre as per the schedules given to the student. Seema was happy to note that she would be able to access her course-related video programmes at her home, as they were telecast through the national television channel.

On returning home Seema eagerly opened her course packages for the four courses. She had enrolled for the basic compulsory papers to start with, as she had no prior work experience. The material was totally unlike any textbook that she had read earlier. It was interactive and seemed almost fun. She specially liked the real-life examples from business situations. She felt even more confident about the possibility of completing the programme in the prescribed time.

Seema returned to her in-laws' house in Palwal in February. Her daughter was then three months old and her sleep cycle was almost set. Seema thought she would keep the afternoon as her study time when the morning housework was taken care of and her daughter slept. Things, however, did not proceed as she had planned. The housework took much longer to finish as she had to interrupt the work several times to attend to her daughter. Her mother-in-law did help with the child, but Seema still had to take time out. By the time she came back to her room after lunch, she was too tired to begin serious studies. She began to lag behind in her schedules that she had planned for herself. Narendra was sympathetic but could offer little help at this juncture. Seema found that her youngest sister-in-law studied in the early hours of the morning before the household stirred into activity. She thought that she could also try out this change and see if it worked. Seema started getting up at 5:30 a.m. which gave her about an hour and a half before she was expected to arrange for the tea and breakfast for everyone. Seema found that she could concentrate better and study in an undisturbed manner. She was, however, often interrupted by her daughter, who did not like Seema leaving her side while she slept. Narendra offered to help out and this eased Seema from the guilt of leaving the child unhappy.

Fulfilling her household and family responsibilities, looking after an infant and studying for a postgraduate programme at the same time sometimes became too much. Seema says, "Those days I felt that I had got onto a conveyer belt which went on and on and once on it, I did not know how to get

down." At times she wondered whether she had taken a premature decision in pursuing the programme. Would it have been better had she waited for the child to grow up a little? Had she made her own life too hectic? She, however, convinced herself that this was the best time for doing the programme, as she wouldn't in any case have been allowed to take up a job, with a small child and expectations regarding household work that a daughter-in-law has to fulfil. She began to hope and dream again about better prospects once she completed her programme.

Seema could not, now that she was at Palwal, attend the counselling sessions regularly. She sought help from some of Narendra's friends who were in managerial positions, but she still had queries that were unattended. She decided that once a month she would go to Faridabad and consult her counsellors. She began keeping a record of all her queries in the space provided in the material itself. Her plan met with some resistance as her mother-in-law did not appreciate her frequent trips to her mother's house. After all, she had been told that the programme did not require attending college at all. Seema and Narendra again had to persuade her to come around. Seema submitted her assignments in time and appeared for her term-end examination. She was happy at the grades she got for her assignments, though in two of the subjects she was advised to get more information on organisational applications. Seema took note of the suggestions and resolved to do better the next time. She also took advantage of her trips to Faridabad for visiting corporate organisations and discussing with executives to collect relevant information for some of her assignments.

Halfway through the second year, things started getting difficult for Seema. Narendra got a posting to Mumbai and left to join his new assignment. Seema was expected to stay back, as the child was still too small and it would be difficult to manage in a new, strange city. Seema now had to work and study without Narendra's support and company. Her access to discussion with Narendra's colleagues and friends also got curtailed. All this happened at a time when her courses were getting more specialised and she felt the need to study harder and more, as well as to look at additional reference material especially if she wanted to score high on her assignments. The visits to the study centre were a big help as she could consult the library there.

Seema once again shifted her study time to late evenings as she had more free time now. She had also become more adept at handling her course work and assignments because she had been taking serious note of the comments of the counsellors. What proved to be a big help was the practice of two of her counsellors of requesting the candidates with the best grades to read out their assignments in class. This not only encouraged Seema to try to be the one who sometimes read out her assignment, it enabled her to improve her own composition of the assignment responses.

She missed the moral support and sharing of responsibility that Narendra had so willingly provided. Sometimes, tired after completing the housework and putting her daughter to sleep, when she sat down at her study table she felt weary and unmotivated. "Is it worthwhile, all this hard work?," she sometimes wondered. Her mother-in-law also sometimes said that Seema did not sit around with the family much and that it wasn't very good on the part of a daughter-in-law to be always immersed in her own work once the kitchen and other work was taken care of. Seema felt that her mother-in-law was somewhat justified in her comments, but she knew that she had to make a choice between the alternative uses of her time. She sometimes despaired that she could not, after working so hard, keep everyone in the family happy. At times like this, it was only the hope of realising her dreams of a fulfilling career that kept her going along with the fact that she was becoming more systematic with her studies. Her performance on the assignments improved a lot. Through interaction with fellow students, she also learnt about the good business and management-related programmes on the television, besides the IGNOU telecasts, and began

watching them regularly. The world of business, the managerial challenges and the coping strategies began to fascinate her and she became an avid reader of all the business literature that she could lay her hands on. As she got deeper into her subjects, she realised that she could actually practise some of the concepts to manage the home, her relationships and indeed her life goals.

During her final semester, Seema accompanied Narendra on a brief trip to Mumbai. She was amazed at the hectic pace of life there, though she had anticipated it somewhat. One evening Narendra took her to the campus of one of the National Institutes for Industrial Training, where he had been asked to attend some training programmes on joining his new assignment. During the training programme, Narendra had been discussing with his senior instructor the possibility of Seema's participation in the Institute's activities as a resource person. The training programme used several concepts that she had pursued for her specialisation. As they visited the instructor now, Seema happily discussed her subject specialisation as well as the project she had completed on trends in human resource development in an IT-enabled business world. Dr. Sinha, the instructor, was most impressed by Seema's grip on her subject and surprised at the breadth of coverage that had been provided to her in an open learning programme. Seema was glad that her serious study of the material had enabled her to leave a good impression on an experienced teacher. Before their visit ended, Mr. Sinha made an exciting offer to Seema. He was prepared to let her try out as an associate learning instructor for his human resources development training sessions once she completed her programme and moved to Mumbai.

Seema was ecstatic and came back home virtually on wings of hope. She turned to Narendra with stars in her eyes and said,

> I knew that the open learning programme would be good for me, and I worked hard for it. What I did not dare hope was that I would be able to get the promise of an assignment even before I got my formal degree. This is the best thing that has happened to me in a long time. I now feel that all the work that I put in was really worth it. The university enabled me to realise my cherished dream of getting into a fulfilling career. I am sure I will make the best out of this opportunity that IGNOU has helped me get.

## SOPHY: NOBLE ASPIRATIONS

**Mridula Rashmi Kindo**

Sophy was born in a working class family in Ernakulam district in Kerala in 1966. She was the third of six children in the family. Being the main breadwinner, her father found it difficult to look after the needs of the entire family. Despite financial problems he tried hard to meet the expenses of the family as well as those of his children's education. The parents sent their children to the best school in the town. Her mother, though illiterate, searched for some kind of work that she would be capable of doing to help support the family. She was lucky to get a job as a babysitter in a close-by colony. She got a meagre amount but it helped to buy stationery for her children. Sophy was good in her studies while she was in school. But when she joined college she fell into bad company. She began spending more time with friends and bunked classes often. This led to her failure. Sophy did not feel sad about her failure, as she knew that she herself was responsible for it. Sophy told herself, "Without studying, how can I pass?" Her father had all his hopes pinned on his third daughter. He felt disheartened but did not say a word to her.

Sophy felt it would be humiliating to go back and sit in the same class for another year while her friends would be her seniors. She decided to discontinue college. When she told her decision to her mother, tears came into her mother's eyes. Being uneducated herself, her mother wanted all her children to be well educated so that they did not have to face the problems which she was facing at present. Sophy could not bear to see tears in her mother's eyes. She told her, "I shall study further and be of some help to my family."

She joined a nursery teachers' training programme. She had difficulties doing her course as it was in English and she came from a Malyalam-medium school. But it was her determination that led her to score good marks and pass with a first class. While she was doing this course, Sophy felt that some inner voice was asking her to join a religious order and sacrifice all her worldly desires. She felt it was some crazy feeling. She thought, "How can such a feeling come into my mind at the time when my family requires me the most?" She knew that her father was supporting them on his pension money. Sophy's father had spent all his savings for his two daughters' marriages. In Kerala one has to pay a huge amount as dowry to the boy with whom one's daughter is to get married. Sophy's father, having spent so much money for the weddings, wanted one of his children to share the financial burden to meet the necessities of life.

Sophy knew that she had to start working as soon as her course was completed to support her brother and sisters. As soon as her training was finished in 1983, she got a job in a private school. Sophy wanted to enrol in higher education but circumstances did not allow her, so she worked as a teacher for two years. By this time her two younger sisters had also found jobs. Thus some of Sophy's responsibilities were over. She felt that it was the right time to disclose to her parents her feelings of wanting to become a nun. Her parents left her free to choose the kind of life she wanted.

Sophy looked out for religious orders which did not have a dress code. She wanted to work for the upliftment of the poor and needy, being an ordinary person. She wanted to inspire people by her work. Thus Sophy joined the society in 1986. In her religious order she was asked whether she would continue higher education or join a course in social work. It was very difficult for Sophy to decide. After much thinking she gave priority to the course in social work as she felt strongly about helping the needy.

Later Sophy was sent to Baroda in Gujarat. She started working as a social worker and wanted to serve the society in the best way possible. She was not content with the course she had completed. She felt that she needed to know much more about society, in particular Indian society where she was working. She became interested in graduating in sociology but it was impossible for her to become a regular student with so much work at hand. She felt that distance education suited her the best. She had heard about Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) from one of her friends who was a student there. To acquire more information about this university she went to a nearby study centre of IGNOU. She was glad to know that she could easily enrol in B.A. of Sociology.

In 1988 she became a student of IGNOU and worked as a social worker as well. Being a resident of Gujarat, she did not face any financial problem, as college education for girls was free in the State. But she again faced difficulty as the course was in English. She had to sit up late in the night to do her assignments and studies. She did not get time to rest at all. Throughout the day she had to look after the work of the religious order as well as social work. Her health started deteriorating and she fell ill. Sophy received a letter from her Superior asking her to leave the religious order, as her health had made her unfit to do the work demanded by the order.

Despite all of these constraints she did not want to leave the course halfway, as she knew the pain of failure. Sophy worked hard for three long years. Sometimes she would get depressed when the study material did not reach her on time. She would then refer to books and periodicals from the university library. Often she had to borrow study materials from her seniors to take the exams. Many of her friends left the course because of lack of proper communication. Her perseverance and desire to gain more knowledge paid in the end. She got a B.A. degree and became a role model for her friends. Influenced by her, a few of them enrolled in various courses in IGNOU. This course was not only an eye-opener to the problems of people living in society, but it helped Sophy in developing her personality as well.

At present Sophy is working as a full-fledged social worker in R.K. Puram in Delhi in the Institute of Social Service. She teaches children who come from nearby jhuggies and she also educates illiterate women of slum J.J. clusters and makes them aware of the day-to-day problems. She looks after vocational courses for young girls who are mostly school dropouts. She feels proud when these girls come back to her to tell her about their success in life. People appreciate the work she is doing for society. She gives credit for this to IGNOU, where she is now doing another course. For Sophy, IGNOU is like a shelter for those who slumber in the educational field. It opens the door for the underprivileged and helps them to meet their needs. It also helps them to recognise their talents and acknowledges the efforts that candidates undertake. IGNOU enables a person to study while working — the only thing one needs to develop is time management skills.

Sophy feels that willpower and perseverance can take you anywhere. She sees failure not as an end but as a new beginning. She feels that to achieve something valuable one has to experience some struggle in life. If one has strong willpower there is always a solution to every problem.

**Conclusion**

The case studies in this section feature five brave women who persevered through all difficulties to emerge successful and empowered. From Shanta, a grassroots worker at one end to Seema Pal an engineering graduate at the other, we have profiles of women who believed in the power of education to enrich their lives. Not only did they become aware of their rights and responsibilities, they also became more competent professionally. Their self-esteem rose as a result of this confidence, and they became more aware that women are an asset to their families and to society.

The process of engaging with their course materials was not an easy one. Children had to be cared for and household duties performed. Sacrifices had to be made: there could be no socialising with family and friends. There were moments of doubt, despair and dejection. Sometimes family members lost their patience. And yet these women persevered. Again, as Shanta commented, "I never thought I could study and pass an examination. This has provided me with a very high level of self-confidence. With this newfound confidence, I will work with fresh zeal. Yes, education is liberating."

# PAKISTAN

**Introduction**

According to data published by UNESCO PROAP (1999), the most recently available figures (1985/86) indicate that only 15% of students in higher education in Pakistan are women. Of these, one third are enrolled in the arts and one third in education, with very low percentages in the hard sciences. Reasons given for women's failure to complete higher education include difficulties in access to transport facilities, marriage and financial constraints. It is suggested that women's choice of discipline is influenced primarily by parental pressure, lack of guidance and social and cultural taboos. Women's entry into post higher-education career paths is influenced by a male-biased work system, work scheduling, sexual harassment, transport, physical facilities and lack of crèches (UNESCO PROAP, 1999). Proposals for including more women in education include the undertaking of a mass media campaign to promote the effectiveness of female education, the provision of special bus transport for females and the opening of higher education institutions for women in remote areas.

Case studies of two women from Pakistan are included here. These are both women who were unable to have easy access to education in their younger years. For Shahnaz Basheer this was because she had to leave school early when her mother became ill, while for Samina, priority was given to the education of her brothers. Both women suffered bad marriages and were divorced in a country where this is socially unacceptable. For both, distance education represented a chance to make a new start in life.

## SHAHNAZ BASHEER: SHARING DIFFICULTIES

**Atifa Durrani**

Shahnaz was born 21 years ago into a conservative family where preference is given to boys over girls, leaving few opportunities for women. She belonged to a lower middle-class family, where even having three meals a day was sometimes difficult. She had four brothers and one younger sister. Her father worked in a local hospital as an attendant with a meagre salary. Her mother was a housewife. From her early childhood, she saw her mother working the whole day. Her eldest brother joined the secondary school, but never went there regularly and ultimately dropped out in class VIII. The other two brothers repeated the story. One of them started to work in a motor workshop. The other two were good for nothing. They roamed about in the streets all day and returned home at night.

The early memories of Shahnaz's childhood were of helping her mother in daily chores. She was admitted to a nearby school, as were other children in the neighbourhood. After coming from school, she had to do household chores with her mother. After she completed her class V, her younger sister was born and her mother wanted Shahnaz to remain with her in the house. Her mother became ill and Shahnaz had to do most of the work. Shahnaz did not like to work at home, but rather wanted to study in school. She had no

choice but to leave school, though deep in her heart she wanted to have more education. She remained in touch with her friends, and sometimes she borrowed their books just for reading.

Shahnaz knew that she could not go to school again, but she decided to take an examination for her class VIII. (In the Pakistani system of education a student can enrol to take examinations without going to formal school, after course preparation.) She got the information from one of her friends and talked to her mother about it. Her parents allowed her reluctantly. They managed to arrange for the examination fee. She was happy and studied very hard. Preparing for nine subjects at once without any help was a big task for her, but she put her heart into it. Her efforts bore fruit and she passed all the subjects. Her result was not very encouraging but not bad either. She was very happy and shared that with her family. Shahnaz showed her interest in further education, but her parents, especially her brothers, were annoyed with her. They thought that it was against their family prestige to let their women leave the four walls of the house. They said that people would comment that they could not provide food to their womenfolk, therefore they were educating them to get jobs for themselves. That would bring a bad name to their family.

Shahnaz was very disappointed with her family's attitude. She wanted to study although she had not set very big ideals for herself, but she had always felt satisfaction and confidence from reading. In the meantime, she met a woman who lived in her neighbourhood and was a teacher in a local primary school. This woman encouraged Shahnaz to start her education again, so in spite of the family's negative response to her studies, she decided to attempt her Xth class examination privately. Her parents and brothers did not like it but allowed her reluctantly as long as they had not found any match for her marriage. One of her brothers said, "Now it is enough for you. You must stop your studies and concentrate on other things which a girl should learn before she gets married."

Again, preparing for Class X was not easy. Now Shahnaz had to do more household work because her mother became bedridden due to backache. Her typical day started early in the morning. She had to do household chores like dusting, cleaning and washing utensils and clothes and preparing food for the family. That daily routine gave her very little time for herself. She used to study late in the night. Often she wanted to go to bed and sleep like other people but her determination gave her strength.

When her father retired from his hospital job, Shahnaz became depressed because this was a financial setback for her family. But one thing she knew was that without completing Xth class she could not get any reasonable job which could add to their family income. She continued to think about alternatives that would earn some money and give her further education at the same time. Shahnaz was very good in sewing and embroidery. She started to stitch clothes for other people, although that business did not prove as successful as she had hoped. In the beginning, she realised that as she was not allowed to go outside, few women knew about her business. She was living in a locality where almost every woman knew how to stitch and those who did not could not afford to pay for someone else to do it. At the same time, Shahnaz had to hide her home business from her brothers because they did not like her to earn even a little money for stitching other people's clothes. However, she continued with it and never lost heart, and after one-and-a-half years, she was able to manage some money for her examination fee for the Xth class examination. With the help of her friend, she enrolled for the examination and started her preparation. She was not very hopeful about getting a good result, and it happened that she failed in three subjects. She was very depressed and lost the heart to start again. It was all over for her. Therefore, with a very heavy heart, she decided to quit her studies.

Shahnaz was then 17 and her parents were worried about her marriage. Finally, the efforts of her mother were rewarded. They found a match for her and she got married to a taxi driver who was good looking but

illiterate. Settling in a large new family with different habits, norms and values was not very easy for her. Unfortunately, the marriage brought nothing for Shahnaz except that she was shifted to a new home and was separated from her parent's family. Her in-laws were uneducated. They started ridiculing her educational background. They criticised her style of doing household chores and did not let her meet people in the neighbourhood. Her in-laws did not have a good reputation among the neighbours. They were greedy people and would do anything to earn money for themselves. Although her parents gave her a large dowry, her in-laws often tried to force Shahnaz to bring money from her parents and they made her life miserable when she refused. They also threatened her with divorce if she did not obey their orders. Her husband started beating her often for being disobedient.

During the whole of that period, her parents were not allowed to visit her. Shahnaz faced the most difficult time of her life, but she accepted it as do most women in the same situation. She could not imagine that worse was coming. She almost died to hear one day that her husband expected her to spend a night with one of his friends who was offering him handsome money. She was shocked and refused instantly. She begged her husband but he became furious and hit her mercilessly. Even though she was pregnant and on the verge of collapse, he did not take her to hospital. The whole pregnancy period was horrible. Her in-laws did not provide her proper food. She became very weak and after giving birth to a baby girl, they did not want her to stay in their home. They called her parents to take her back. Her parents visited her and they were humiliated. Shahnaz told them the whole story. They were shocked and took her with them. Her parents decided for divorce. It was a very bold decision on their part. Divorce, although acceptable in religion, is never accepted socially. It was very disgraceful for the family as well as for Shahnaz, but there was no other alternative left.

Shahnaz could not forget that day when she and her daughter were thrown out of her in-laws house. The only thing she could bring from there was her daughter Huma, wrapped in her dopatta. She was completely shattered, feeling that she could not do anything further in her life. She thought that her life was over. She lost faith in herself. Her parents consoled her and filed for divorce, but that required a lot of money, time and patience. She did not have any of those at that moment. "It was a torturous time. At that critical time of my life, I wanted to commit suicide, but whenever I saw my daughter her presence changed my mind. I decided that I would live for her," she confided.

Her parents gave her immense emotional support, which she badly needed at that time. With their encouragement she changed her attitude towards life and prepared to fight for herself. Her daughter was then one year old and her divorce case was in process. She once again thought of restarting her education. She says, "That was the time when I thought of myself again. I was sure that through education I would be able to do something for myself and for my daughter. It was just like a light at the end of a tunnel. I was hopeful for myself and my little daughter."

Although she decided to restart her studies, she did not know how and from where she could find any information. She was determined but did not find herself able enough to prepare for all 10 subjects for the examination.

After one-and-a-half years, she finally got her divorce. She opted for her daughter and was given the right that her husband would never ever take her back from her. Life passed routinely but differently for her. She remained busy in daily household chores but her mind remained preoccupied with future planning. Now she had an aim in her life, to give her daughter a better future.

To provide Huma a safe and prosperous future and make herself economically independent, Shahnaz had to explore available options. She contacted her previous teacher and talked about her plans. Her teacher told her about the Women's Secondary Educational Programme at Allama Iqbal Open University's (AIOU) and briefly explained the distance education system. Shahnaz continued her stitching business and saved some money for her admission fee. In 1997 she took admission and started her studies through distance learning. Her teacher encouraged her to continue her education. She also supported her and lent her some money. In the meantime, her teacher got married and moved to another city.

In the first semester, Shahnaz became a little confused with the method of instruction and style of distance learning. But gradually, she became used to it. She took some time to adjust herself according to the distance learning system and did not face many problems regarding courses since they were in Urdu (national language). She submitted her assignments on time. The study centre was in a nearby school so she attended tutorial meetings as well. Her mother accompanied her and she took Huma with her as well.

In her second semester, she faced a lot of problems. English and Science were the most difficult subjects for her. She did not have anybody to teach her at home. Her tutorial centre was quite far from her house. She attended few tutorial meetings. It was hard for her to do assignments for each course. She did most of her assignments late at night. She failed because the courses were too difficult for her. Preparing again for those difficult subjects disappointed her very much. She was not satisfied with her tutors, as they could not make her understand these subjects. She was disappointed and discouraged, but she continued. Although she managed to complete her assignments and send them to her respective course tutors, she could not deliver the goods in the final examination and she failed.

Shahnaz's life got very busy. She used to remain occupied with daily chores, stitching, taking care of Huma and, of course, her studies. She was running out of her savings. Shahnaz was in desperate need to find a job so that she could at least support her daughter and herself. But it was very difficult because the minimum requirement for most jobs was Xth class. Fortunately, she met a woman in her tutorial who told her about a community organisation which was establishing a community-based school and needed a few teachers for their primary section. Shahnaz was lucky and she got the job on daily wages.

Meanwhile, she reappeared for the English and Science courses, but again could not pass them. She was very disappointed and, at that stage, she thought of quitting: "I lost interest in those subjects. I hated them. But they were compulsory subjects, therefore, I had to pass them in any case."

Whenever she felt dejected and decided to quit her studies, Shahnaz always thought of her old parents and her small daughter. Their presence gave her motivation to continue: "Whenever I saw my parents and Huma, I always thought of providing them some relief. My parents were supporting me emotionally and to the best of their capabilities. They wanted to compensate me, but that was not their fault. It was my fate. I cannot blame them."

Shahnaz liked the rest of the subjects. Home Economics, First Aid and Family Health and Care were her favourites: "I liked those subjects very much. They are of a practical nature. One can benefit from them. My daughter got injured while playing, and I did first aid to her. It was all because I had knowledge of doing that. The formal school curriculum does not have subjects like these."

Home Economics was a very easy subject for her. She was very good at stitching and sewing, therefore the practical work of that subject was easy to do. She got maximum marks in that subject: "In my tutorial class, I used to make patterns of dresses efficiently because I knew how to cut and sew a suit. I also

helped my class fellows in cutting and sewing. They, in return, helped me in understanding subjects like Mathematics and English."

Shahnaz acknowledged emotional and moral support from her course mates. They shared her problems and were sympathetic with her. They discussed their course difficulties with each other: "I learnt more while sharing difficulties with other people. We used to discuss each other's problems. That helped me to understand and clarify my concepts in Mathematics and in General Science."

She hailed her tutors' support in her studies. They helped her in solving assignments. They not only guided her academically but emotionally as well. She could not forget her mathematics tutor who had a sympathetic attitude towards her. "She was very good person. She accepted my assignments sometime after the due date because she knew about my life. How could a person forget those people who helped in difficult times? Those were the kind people who encouraged me to continue my studies."

Shahnaz's studying not only changed her life but affected other members of the family as well. She re-enrolled her younger sister in a nearby school since she had left her education for two major reasons, one being her loss of interest in her studies and failing in many subjects and the other being financial problems. Shahnaz argued with her and convinced her to resume her studies. She took the responsibility for her finances. Now her sister has completed her VIIIth class and is studying in IXth class.

Shahnaz is very concerned about educating her daughter. She is very interested in admitting her to any English-medium school. She wants her to learn English fluently as she is convinced that learning English is essential for everybody. She wants to see her daughter's life become different from her own: "I want Huma to be a doctor. I will not marry her at an early age like my parents did me. She must enjoy her life. I want her to be an educated and confident person."

Shahnaz has a firm belief about the positive effects of education. She has become far more confident than before and her approach towards life has changed. Now she is an optimistic person and is of the opinion that there is always a way out: "Education gave me conviction. I found many ways to tackle my problems. I faced many setbacks in life, but determination and conviction to a cause provided me incentives to carry out my studies."

Of course, she remained engaged in other activities along with her studies. Otherwise it could have been very difficult for her to study and to do the rest of activities together: "Distance education provided me a range of subjects. I chose subjects and studied them at my own pace. When I failed in a few subjects, I was very dejected because I had to reappear for examinations. In a formal system, that could not have been possible. I had to study for all the courses after failing in compulsory subjects."

Shahnaz completed her matriculation (Xth class) in the year 2000. She was very happy. For her, that certificate meant a lot — it was a milestone in her life. Although it was not very prestigious, the effects and outcomes it brought into Shahnaz's life were commendable: "In many people's opinion it was not a big achievement, but for me, it meant a lot. Now I can apply for many jobs like midwifery, health visitor and teacher in a vocational centre. I was glad. Without that certificate I had nothing to be proud about. Education provided me opportunities to improve my life and I did."

Shahnaz now has a certificate of matriculation in her hand and has established a stitching centre. She has a few girls there for training also. Her daughter is in the nursery class of an English-medium school. That

makes her proud. It is all because of that little moment in which she thought of starting studying again in her life.

Her advice to women is this:

> Education always helps you. It makes you confident enough to combat hard times and provides you with options to improve your life. Distance learning is an alternative method of education. In other words, it is a second chance in your life to study, different but very effective. You may encounter a few problems in the beginning, but do not give up. Restart your studies whenever you get a chance. You will definitely feel the difference in your life.

## SAMINA: RISING ABOVE ADVERSITY

**Atifa Durrani**

Samina is not as old as she looks. When she was in her late thirties she appeared an old lady. Time has been very harsh to her. She was born in Daira Din Pinah, a small town approximately 100 kilometres from Multan city. Her father was a clerk in a local post office. Her mother was a housewife who never acquired any formal education. Instead, she had religious education, namely recitation of the Holy Qur'an, from one of her family friends. Samina had eight brothers and sisters. She was number four in her family. She got her early education in her native town. Her family was conservative, and she and the rest of the women in the family wore burqa and observed purdah. She was an ambitious soul and wanted to pursue her education. Due to the large family, her parents gave preference to their sons' education over their daughters'. Therefore, her education suffered and she had to manage her studies by herself.

There was only one middle school in her town. After completing her class VIII from her native town, she prepared herself for class X as a private candidate. She passed her examination successfully, and this success encouraged her to learn more. She wanted to share her ambition with someone.

She was very close to one of her paternal cousins who was much older. This cousin, Apa, was a schoolteacher in Multan, and offered to support her and pay her fees for the examination. So when Samina heard that Apa was ill, she wanted to visit her. Her parents allowed her to make the trip to Multan. Her cousin was a spinster and lived alone in her house. Her cousin recovered soon, but she wanted Samina to stay longer with her. During that period, Samina enrolled for graduation and with Apa's emotional and financial support, she sat for the examination.

"I knew Apa was praying for me," Samina says, "so I was not scared of exams. I had prepared all the subjects. I was confident."

She was happy. She passed her graduation with good marks. She was very pleased and all the family was very happy as well: "I could not forget that day. My father came all the way from Daira Din Pinah to Multan to wish me success. He was very happy. I could see happiness on his face."

After completing her graduation, Samina went back to her town. Her father had a heart attack and fell terribly ill. She took very good care of her father. Her brothers were earning a reasonable wage, but due to

their large families they did not support their parents much. When their father was critically ill, her eldest brother took him to Multan and admitted him to a hospital. Later on, though, he always complained that the other brothers did not spend the money on their father's illness that they should have. He said, "They could not settle their expenses regarding my father's illness. I was very disappointed with my brothers' attitude. They were sons; the father should have been their responsibility. They should not have behaved in that manner."

Samina was one of the few girls in her family who got higher secondary education. But her education caused problems for her marital prospects as the majority of the men in the family were less educated, and her parents did not want her to marry outside the family. After considerable time, they managed to decide their daughter's marriage. Her maternal cousin, Sajjad, became the final choice although he was not a compatible match. He was less educated than Samina, but her parents had to compromise. Samina married in 1986 and settled in Multan. Her parents gave her a reasonable dowry but her in-laws were never satisfied with her: "My in-laws did not like me at all. They always demanded more money from my parents. They ridiculed me in front of many guests because of my religious and simple background."

Her in-laws were very quarrelsome. They always tried to hurt Samina, and her husband also started beating her often. Samina was living a terrible life. During her first pregnancy they did not give her proper food to eat. She was very weak. When she gave birth to a baby girl, they were furious: "They did not even bother to visit my daughter and me in the hospital. Only my parents gave clothes to my daughter. My in-laws were expecting a baby boy from me."

Her parents took her away from Multan to their native town where she remained with them for three months. During that period not one of her in-laws ever came to see her. When her parents sent her back to Multan, she found herself an unwanted guest in her own house: "My mother-in-law always threatened that she would abandon me and remarry her son because I could not give them a boy. I knew that they did not want me to live with them. But I did not have any other place to live because after marriage women have to live in their husband's house. I had to live with them, whatever circumstances I had to face."

Due to social pressure, her parents could not afford to keep her with them. They were afraid of other people's opinions that would blame their daughter for the problems in her marriage. Both were old and managing their finances with difficulty. Samina also did not tell anybody about her life because she knew people would blame her. She also avoided telling many things to her parents: "I did not want to hurt my parents. They could not do anything then. They could not change my fate. They would have been more depressed after knowing my situation."

When Samina's father died after the birth of her second daughter, her brothers did not allow her to come home to escape her cruel in-laws. They blamed Samina for her attitude; they thought that Samina did not like the proposal from the very first day. Samina was really hurt to find what her brothers thought about it: "They were aware of the circumstances which I was passing through. They did not want to support my stay with my parents because they knew they had to bear our expenses. Therefore, they always sent me back to my husband's house."

She continued to be treated very badly by her in-laws. They did not provide enough food for the three of them: "I used to remain hungry. They gave us only one chapati. So I gave it to my daughters. How could I eat it while my daughters remained hungry?"

After the birth of her third daughter, her in-laws sent her back to her parents' home again. She stayed in her mother's house for six months. Relatives from their family arranged settlement between the estranged families, and she was again sent to her husband's house: "I did not want to go there, but had no other choice. My mother, sisters and brothers, everybody knew that I was having a terrible time with my in-laws. I sacrificed myself for my parents' prestige and my lack of money."

She often talked to her husband about taking up a job in a nearby school, but he never agreed with her. After knowing her intention, her husband burnt her academic certificates and degree. Quarrels had become a daily routine for her now. Her marital life was becoming unbearable. Her in-laws forced her husband, Sajjad, to divorce her: "I did not want divorce, but I thought it was enough for me. I could not bear it any more. I thought I should go back to my parents' home and do something else with my life."

Samina left her in-laws' house, but they did not allow her to take anything with her, even her three daughters. She was shocked. Her brothers assured her that her in-laws would give her daughters after some time. She was much relieved when she got her divorce in 1994, but she was worried about her children. She started living with her mother. She wanted to get a job. But unfortunately she did not have any degree or certificate to prove her academic qualifications. She was very disheartened: "Nothing was left for me in life. I was confused. I was desperately in need of a job but for that I had to study again. It was a very long-term plan for me. But I did not have any other alternative. So I decided to start all over again."

In the meantime, one of her brother's friends who was a lawyer agreed to file a child custody case on her behalf. He was a very kind person. He did not charge any fee.

Samina was relieved but was not in a condition to prepare for the private examination that she had to take for all subjects at once. During that time she was engaged in her divorce hearing and she had to go to Multan often to attend the hearing regarding child custody. She was upset and discussed her problem with one of her friends. Her friend told her about Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), where she was a student of the B.A. programme. That made Samina decide to study through the distance learning system. She took admission to the higher secondary programme (F.A.) of the University in 1996. Her mother and younger sister encouraged her: "My mother and sister were very supportive of me. My sister, who had completed her higher secondary education, helped me in solving assignments. My mother used to share daily household chores with me so that I could spare time for my studies."

Besides teaching children in her home, she started a business of poultry farming. She sold eggs and chickens to her neighbours. In this way, she managed to support her expenses. Although she kept herself very busy in her daily chores, studying and business, she always remained preoccupied with the thoughts of her children who were with her in-laws: "I could not sleep at night. I used to cry for my daughters. I knew they were not treated well. Sometimes I wanted to commit suicide as I missed them so much. I could not commit suicide because I was hopeful that one day my daughters would be with me and we would be together again."

She continued with her studies. She wanted to be economically sound enough so that she could support her daughters. Her child custody case was taking much time. She was worried as her husband was using delaying tactics so that the children could not be handed over to their mother. Her life was difficult and she was mentally and emotionally disturbed, which made it hard to concentrate on her studies. In the beginning, she did not do well in her assignments. She got very low marks: "At that time, I lost my

interest in studies. I wanted to quit my education. I was so disappointed that I lost my motivation and need for studying."

Samina highly appreciated her cousin's role in her life. When she was very disappointed with her life situation and studies, and even thought of quitting her studies, she wrote a letter to her cousin and shared her feelings with her. Apa encouraged her and convinced her to not quit. Her cousin supported her emotionally and made her change her decision: "It was a turning point in my life. If Apa had not convinced me to continue studying, I would not have been able to do what I have." And whenever Samina went to Multan for the court hearings, she visited Apa. "Apa always encouraged me… She remained a very strong emotional and financial support for me. I always shared my personal problems with her. She was the only relative of mine who helped me at that critical time of my life."

Samina fortunately did not face those problems which many students encounter. She received date sheets and admission forms regularly. Other than a few courses, she did not face any difficulty in understanding the courses. Most of the courses were in Urdu language and the tutors were very co-operative with her: "My tutors were local teachers and they all knew my life situation. They used to encourage me and also sometimes gave me extensions to submit my assignments."

She liked attending tutorials and she did not face any problem regarding the tutorial centre: "Tutorials were very effective during the semester. Academically, they provided students the opportunity to discuss our course difficulties with tutors as well as with our course mates. Moreover, they also served as a social gathering for us. We also shared our personal and domestic problems with each other."

She appreciated the usefulness of the tutors' comments on students' assignments. She had a very high opinion of the tutors' remarks: "I always took guidance from the tutors' comments. I used to write my assignments in the light of their remarks. Their comments and suggestions guided me not only in my assignments but in the examinations as well."

She appeared in the examination and passed the subjects in the first semester. English and General Mathematics were the subjects which were not easy for her to understand: "I liked English as subject as I had secured good marks in the previous examination of higher secondary certificate. But AIOU's English course was quite different and difficult. It did not have the same content as the formal school curriculum for the English course. It was more functional in nature and for daily use." She passed the English course in the second attempt. She could not get good marks but managed to clear the subject.

Her favourite subjects included General Science, Islamiat and Arabic: "Islamiat and Arabic were my favourite subjects because they were easy to understand. I already had information about them. General Science was a very interesting subject. I always liked to know about new things related to the human body, planets, the universe, etc. Science introduced me to a new, interesting world."

She continued with her studies. Her business was running well enough for her. Samina was also an expert in embroidery and stitching, so she started stitching clothes for other people. She was earning enough to meet her expenses. In the meantime, she paid her fees by herself besides contributing to the home income.

Samina passed her higher secondary certificate in 1997. She was happy with her success, but she knew it was just a beginning for her. She wanted to continue her education, and took admission to a degree programme in a Bachelor of Arts in 1998. It had been nearly two years but her child custody case was not

settled yet. She did not know when it would be decided and whether it would be in her favour or not. She continued with her studies.

Distance education was a different experience for her as it provided her with time to do other activities along with her studies. She was comfortable with that system of education: "It suited me very well. I was fortunate, as I never faced any problem with my result card or date sheets. That was the reason I liked that system. Besides studying, I was able to carry on other activities for my earnings which otherwise I could not have done. Distance learning provided me with a second chance for getting education."

Samina is a very firm supporter of the distance learning system for women, especially those living in the rural areas and small towns: "Women who are living in small towns like ours and observing purdah are not allowed to go outside their homes. Allama Iqbal Open University provides those women with a chance to get education at their doorstep. In my area, many women are taking advantage of that alternative option. In my opinion it suits women who have limited chances of obtaining formal education."

Samina has established a tuition centre in her home. During the summer vacations, the number of students has increased as parents send their children to Samina. Her younger sister also helps her in teaching children. Her stitching and embroidery business continues. She has a few girls who come to learn cutting and stitching from her for nominal fees.

Samina has completed her two semesters of the Intermediate (B.A.) programme and is determined to complete it in due time. She always speaks in favour of education. She has also convinced a few girls to take admission and restart their studies through AIOU:

> Education gave me motivation to look forward in my life. My life was very difficult and if I was not engaged in studying, I would have been dead. In my case education provided me with the reason for survival. The only thing I could say is, education for women is much more essential as compared to men. It prepares a woman, and makes her strong enough to face hardships in life with courage. Education provides you with chances to improve your life.

**Conclusion**

For both of the women described in this section there were many similarities. Both Shahnaz and Samina escaped from bad marriages and for both distance education helped them to improve their employment status so they could establish new lives for themselves and their children. But it gave them much more — it gave them new self-confidence and self-conviction and new motivations for their lives. They became inspirations to their children and, in Shahnaz's case, her sister was also encouraged to study because of her example. Both had to work hard at menial jobs to raise enough money for their course fees. While Samina found the academic work to be relatively easy, Shahnaz overcame difficulties that arose because she was unable to attend study centres, and she bounced back from the disappointment of initial failure in some of her subjects. Both valued the emotional and moral support they received, Shahnaz from her course mates, and Samina from a close relative.

# SRI LANKA

**Introduction**

In Sri Lanka there are no visible barriers to distance education for women. There are several probable reasons for this. One is an educational policy that has existed since 1945, providing free primary, secondary and higher education that is non-discriminatory towards either sex. Another is the influence of Buddhism, the religion professed by the majority of Sri Lanka's population (approximately 70%) which accords equal status to men and women. There is no rigid structure to restrict the movement of women in the educational, social or political arenas. Sri Lanka set up a Women's Bureau in 1978 (even before the introduction of the United Nations convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in 1979), and a special ministry for Women's Affairs was created in 1983, followed by a National Committee of Women in 1993.

However, in remote areas the education of girls continues to remain subsidiary to that of boys. Owing to the need for their help in the rural and semi-urban homes, a greater right to education is assigned to males.

The cases of four women are included in this section. All of them found distance education to be their salvation when they were unable to gain admission to conventional universities for various reasons, including, in the case of Sujatha Seneviratne, having to assume at an early age the responsibilities of her sick mother.

## PREMASEELI AMARASINGHE: EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT

**Nalini Ratnasiri**

Premaseeli was born as the eighth child in a family in which the father was a carpenter and the mother a housewife. She had five elder sisters and two elder brothers. She was only three-and-a-half-years old when her mother died. Her father remarried, and Premaseeli has three stepsisters from her father's second marriage. Premaseeli's father who was a carpenter by trade, was the sole breadwinner of his large family, and he faced enormous problems in trying to meet their day-to-day needs.

Premaseeli was lucky to the extent that her stepmother was a considerate woman whose main concern was to feed the family and bring up the children. But she, along with her siblings, was unlucky because neither her father nor her stepmother was interested in the education of the children. Premaseeli attended a primary school a little away from her home, despite her living next to a school with better facilities where the students received a better education and were given a good knowledge of English as well.

From her very young days, Premaseeli was determined to pursue higher education. Even at a tender young age, she demonstrated leadership qualities at home, in the paddy fields where she worked alongside the parents and siblings, and in school. Premaseeli remembers that she was given two slate

pencils for a week and when one broke, the stepmother could not afford to give her a new one. In the school compound there were broken pieces of slate thrown away, and little Premaseeli was resourceful enough to look for a suitable piece to write with. The teacher, seeing the hardworking nature of the child, paid much attention to her studies. Premaseeeli was happy in school but extremely unhappy at home where there was no harmony. Neither the father nor the stepmother had any time to give the necessary love and attention to any of the children.

Amidst all this unhappiness and difficulty, Premaseeli continued to work hard and passed the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level examination with credit. She continued studying for the GCE Advanced Level examination in the limited subjects that were taught in the school. However, she was not successful in gaining admission to a university, so she then decided to register for an external degree.

As there was no possibility for Premaseeli's father to provide her with the necessary fees for her classes, she decided to find the money by collecting produce from the home garden and selling it to the grocery shops. However, she found she was not able to find adequate money in this manner, and she decided to look for employment.

While seeking employment, there were many applications and disappointments until she was recruited as a casual clerk at the University of Peradeniya. During the time she worked there, Premaseeli yearned to do higher studies like all the undergraduates she saw every day.

After one-and-a-half years at Peradeniya, she was transferred to the External Services Agency in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. It was unfortunate that there was a rule preventing the staff of this agency from registering for an external degree in a university. Premaseeli had no alternative and her dreams and hopes of earning a degree faded away as she watched her registration for a degree lapse.

While at the External Services Agency, Premaseeli married the man of her choice, a schoolmate, and someone who was very supportive of her desire to obtain a university education. By 1981, Premaseeli became the proud mother of a baby daughter.

Sri Lanka, realising the potential of distance education, established the Open University of Sri Lanka in 1980 with the External Services Agency forming its nucleus. Its staff, including Premaseeli, was transferred to this new institution. From the beginning, the Open University offered a large number of new programmes of study through distance education. Premaseeli was at that time working in the general administration branch of the Open University and was involved in the scheduling of applications for the LL.B. (law) degree. Premaseeli's desire for higher education, which had been dormant for some time, surfaced once again and she registered with the Open University to study for an LL.B. degree.

Premaseeli's daughter was three years old at that time, and she and her husband commenced the building of a new house. Both of them had to spend quite a lot of the time assisting in the building of the house, as they did not have enough money to employ sufficient labour. Premaseeli's duties at this time also included looking after her daughter and the day-to-day work in the home including cooking and washing.

Premaseeli had to discipline herself to face a full-time job as a clerk of the university, a mother, a wife, and a student of the LL.B. degree programme at the Open University. It is interesting to see how she faced this seemingly insurmountable situation. Premaseeli had more than the necessary determination and

the discipline to successfully undertake studies towards the degree, but what she lacked was time. Her biggest challenge was to find time for full-time employment, her home and her studies.

Premaseeli lived several miles away from her place of work and had to use the public transport to get there and back. It took almost one hour each way, and those two hours she spent on the road was time she could not afford. However, she made the best use of it by finding a corner in the bus or train where she could open her books and study. In this way she found the necessary time, which she thought was not available to her. Premaseeli also wrote short notes of the study sessions and kept them under the glass pad of her office desk to read and re-read whenever she had a break from her work.

Unlike most students, Premaseeli found it very difficult to find the time to attend day schools, but she was resourceful and found a way to get round this problem as well. There was no hindrance to her listening to a recording while going about her domestic chores, so she got a fellow student to tape record the day school discussions so she could listen to them several times while cooking, sweeping and attending to her daughter. By the end of it all, Premaseeli's husband, too, had gathered much knowledge listening to these day school discussions.

When Premaseeli needed extra time for studies she could find it only by sacrificing sleep. But she disciplined herself to find the time, somehow or other, to do her studies and was always successful in all her continuous assessments and the final examinations. Adding to Premaseeli's difficulties was that her mother-in-law, with whom she lived, did not appreciate the fact that Premaseeli was not spending all her time on the husband and children. But as life became more difficult at home, Premaseeli's determination also grew.

Special mention must be made of the support of Premaseeli's husband during this period. He helped her with the housework as well as with some of the office work, which she brought home. By the time she was to face the final examination of the LL.B., Premaseeli was expecting her second child. This was especially a trying time for her but as she put it, nothing was impossible because of her husband's support, and she managed to go through it. Her goal was finally achieved when the Open University awarded her the LL.B. degree.

It was at this time that the university advertised the post of Educational Assistant in the Division of Educational Technology. Premaseeli applied for the post and was selected. She is now placed in charge of the Audio/Video Resources Centre of this Division.

Premaseeli's next ambition was to attend the Law College and become an attorney-at-law, a professional qualification that supplements the LL.B. degree and that is required for practising law. However, her family responsibilities were making such a demand on her time that she did not embark on this next step until her second child started schooling. Then she was back again with her books, and being more experienced and with older children, she found more time for studies. She successfully completed the Law College final examination and became an attorney-at-law.

Premaseeli is now 45 years old and finds time for her employment in the university and her housework. In addition, she undertakes writing of deeds on real estate transactions during her spare time, which supplements her income. She is very satisfied with her situation in life and is now determined to provide to her children all the opportunities for education which she almost lost. In Premaseeli's words, it is thanks to distance education that her dream of higher education came true.

Premaseeli, who had a full-time job, could not find the time for peer interaction and, to her mind, this was a real disadvantage. She advises distance education students to group themselves for discussion and study. She has a message to women who wish to further their education. "Do not believe in the myth that women cannot find the time for education. I found distance education my solution to achieve my goals while holding a full-time job and being a good wife and mother. If I can do it, so can you."

## SUJATHA SENEVIRATNE: FAMILY CARE-GIVER

**Nalini Ratnasiri**

Sujatha was born in Kandy, the hill capital of Sri Lanka. Her father worked in the Encyclopaedia Office at the University of Peradeniya. The mother was a housewife and spent her time looking after her happy family of husband and two children.

This situation was disturbed when her mother became sick while Sujatha was still small. The mother's sickness affected the entire family in one way or another, and in Sujatha's case, delayed her commencing school by six months. Once she was in school, she was a dutiful and hardworking student. She was fortunate to be successful at a scholarship examination while in class VII. This entitled her to admission to a larger and better school, but the parents preferred her to attend the school closer to her home. She sat the G.C.E. (Ordinary Level) examination obtaining one distinction, five credits and one ordinary pass. Soon after, Sujatha's father was transferred to the Encyclopaedia Office in Colombo, so she moved to one of the schools close to Colombo and commenced studies for the G.C.E. Advanced Level examination.

Sujatha's mother's illness was getting worse and the responsibility of looking after the home moved on to young Sujatha's shoulders. Her father retired from service and, unluckily for young Sujatha, he became a diabetic patient. The father's pension was not adequate for the family needs. Sujatha's mind was now on finding a job even though she was studying for the G.C.E. Advanced Level examination. She applied for a teaching post and was not successful. She also applied for a post of trainee nurse and luckily, she was selected.

Her results of the G.C.E. examination were not adequate to gain admission to the university where she wanted to study biology, so she settled down to becoming a trainee nurse at the Nurses' Training School (NTC) in Colombo. During this training period she had to follow courses at the NTC and also work in the hospital.

Sujatha was a young lady with varied interests and during the first year of nursing studies she also started following weekend classes in English literature. She obtained a pass in English Literature at the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination and continued to study English for the G.C.E. Advanced Level examination. However, as the demand on her time grew with having to attend to the patients in the hospital, work on her nursing courses and also look after her sick parents and a younger sister, she gave up attending the weekend English classes and concentrated on the nursing courses.

At 23 years of age, Sujatha became a trained nurse and was assigned to work in the intensive care unit of the neurology section at the General Hospital in Colombo. She was selected to work in this very responsible position since she had performed extremely well at the examinations. However, she was not

quite settled in her mind as to whether she would continue to be a nurse for the rest of her life. What bothered her most was that there were no opportunities for a university education in nursing in Sri Lanka and that it was very difficult to improve her job prospects in the nursing profession as society had such a poor image of the nursing profession.

Sujatha followed an eight-month special training course in Intensive Care and Orthopaedics under a Finnish aid programme. This eight-month period was a time when Sujatha was not assigned hospital duties, which meant that she did not have to attend to patients, was not called for night duty and had quite a lot of free time. Once again Sujatha's desire to study further surfaced in her mind. She made use of her free time during weekends to follow classes in computer programming with a view to changing her job in the future.

Sujatha became increasingly convinced that the nursing profession must be strengthened in some way to erase the poor image of the profession. Her way of attempting this was to follow a university education. This, combined with her love for the study of biology, made her register for an external degree in science at the University of Peradeniya. To help her read for the degree, she attended weekend classes. By this time she was back in hospital service and the busy schedule there prevented her from attending these classes regularly. It was at this time that Sujatha met her school botany teacher with whom she had continued to associate. She was confident that Sujatha would one day overcome the setback she faced in education. Realising that distance education would be the answer to Sujatha's problems, she advised her to register for the B.Sc. degree at the Open University.

In 1991, Sujatha did, indeed, register and in 1994 she was awarded her B.Sc. degree. By this time, the Open University had commenced its Nursing degree programme, the first ever offered in Sri Lanka. Here was an opportunity for Sujatha to realise her dream. She registered for the B.Sc. (Nursing) degree in 1994, and was in the second batch of students taken for this programme.

It was not easy for Sujatha to continue her studies along with her demanding profession and her responsibilities at home which had increased many-fold due to her father losing his eyesight and becoming bedridden. Sujatha had to tend to him along with her sick mother and also her sister.

Having overcome all obstacles, Sujatha became a first class graduate nurse in 1997. Following this, she made an application for a post of Lecturer at the Open University and was selected. Unfortunately, she was unable to accept the post due to certain administrative problems, so she continued to serve the Ministry of Health as a Supra-Grade nurse in charge of the Intensive Care Unit.

Sujatha was then selected to follow a master's level programme in Nursing Professional Studies in Australia. On her return, Sujatha was released from her normal duties at the Intensive Care Unit to take up duties as a relief tutor at NTS. Today she enjoys her position as a tutor and is happy to have the opportunity to help her fellow nurses to further their studies.

Sujatha attributes her success to regular work, making her own notes for study, paying much attention to the submission of assignments on time and finding time to study such as the time spent travelling on buses.

**SANDHYA DOLUWEERA: DREAM REALISED**
**Nalini Ratnasiri**

Sandhya was the only child in her family. She had a very comfortable life right from her childhood, since her father was a postmaster and her mother a professional nurse. Sandhya had her education in one of the good schools in Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka, the number of places for study in the conventional universities is very limited and therefore admission is very competitive. Sandhya was a victim of this situation and had to resign herself to the idea that she would not have the opportunity to obtain a university education. Here was a case where, in spite of a fairly comfortable situation in life, she had been deprived of the one chance she longed for, the chance to further her studies.

If the Open University of Sri Lanka did not use distance education methodology, Sandhya's dream would have remained a dream forever. Today her dream has become a reality and that reality has gone very much further than her original dream. She holds a bachelor's degree in Science from the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), and both a diploma and a master's in Distance Education from the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) of India.

Sandhya's experience of distance education within the country as well as between countries is remarkable. Because she was the only child in the family, her parents would not hear of her going to another country to further her education, even in a field which was not available for study in her own country. It was distance education that came to her rescue.

It was lucky for Sandhya that her family decided to go to the temple in her village on one full-moon day, the practice among Buddhists. One of her father's friends also decided to come to the temple on that day. When the friend inquired about the family, the father had told him how unhappy Sandhya was to not be able to get admission to the university. This friend happened to be a teacher at the OUSL and it was very easy for him to convince both father and daughter to register for undergraduate study there.

Sandhya was a responsible and dutiful student. She mastered distance study methodology and was successful in obtaining her degree. This was the opening she was looking for and which was given to her through distance education. From then on, there was no looking back for Sandhya. She worked as a demonstrator in Botany in a temporary capacity for a period of one year, following which she was selected as an Educational Assistant in a permanent capacity.

By this time, she was working in the Educational Technology Division and became interested in further studying distance education. She was the proud recipient of a Rajiv Gandhi Fellowship to follow a course of studies leading to a diploma in Distance Education from IGNOU in India, a course which was conducted through distance education and spanned two countries.

Subsequent to her obtaining the diploma in distance education, she followed a Master's of Arts degree in Distance Education. This programme of study delivered from one country and received in another country is a perfect example of the advantage of distance education.

Sandhya has now reverted to the Department of Botany in the Faculty of Natural Sciences of the OUSL, where she uses all the knowledge she gained in Botany and distance education to give her best to hundreds of others like her who are following in her footsteps.

On looking back at the periods of study at the OUSL and IGNOU, Sandhya says that distance education was her saviour and if not for distance education, she would never have achieved her goals in life.

## HEMAMALI WITHANACHCHI: SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES

**Nalini Ratnasiri**

Hemamali was the second child in a family of four children. Her siblings were all brothers. Her father ran a small boutique and her mother was a midwife. Since the mother was in a transferable service, she was moved from one hospital to another every four years, and this affected Hemamali's young days. Though Hemamali was born in a suburb of Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka, her mother's situation caused her to start her schooling in a small primary school about 100 miles away.

Hemamali was a bright student and won a government scholarship in Class V. This gave her the opportunity to gain admission to a Central College, which had better facilities, to continue her studies. Mathematics turned out to be a problem for Hemamali, and she opted to study commerce subjects. She passed the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) examination, but did not perform well enough at the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) examination to gain admission to a university.

Like most students in Sri Lanka who do not gain admission to a university, Hemamali was completely disappointed and decided to obtain employment as the only alternative left to her. She sat for several selection tests for admission to the Sri Lanka Technical College, Teacher Training College and also to Nurses' Training School (NTS).

She was selected for admission to the NTS and commenced her training in 1966. In 1970, Hemamali obtained the Certificate in Nursing and started work as a staff nurse at the General Hospital in Colombo. She was fortunate to receive a nine-month special training in an operating theatre after which she was assigned to work in the cardio-thoracic operating theatre of the hospital, a privilege offered to staff who perform well. An important year in Hemamali's life was 1973, when she got married. In 1974, she became the mother of a baby daughter, and in 1975, her son was born. By 1976 Hemamali was pregnant with her third child. Her husband worked in a state organisation and life was comfortable for the family.

Hemamali was later transferred out of the operating theatre to a medical ward. During this period Hemamali, along with about 5000 other nurses, sat for an examination to select persons to be appointed as Ward Sister. About 115 were successful and Hemamali was one of them. At the subsequent interview, she was placed 11th. However, the promotion was not forthcoming. This made Hemamali very unhappy and led to her resigning from service in the Ministry of Health and going to Iran to work there. She worked in Iran from 1978 to 1979, a difficult time when Iran saw a complete change of political scene.

On her return to Sri Lanka in 1980, Hemamali started work at a private hospital in Colombo. In 1982 her situation at home was difficult. Her salary was not enough to run the home and educate her three children.

Her husband was not in a position to support the family as he had by this time decided to give up his job and join a Marxist group to engage in full-time politics.

Once again Hemamali packed her bags and this time she went to Oman where she worked from 1983 to 1987. Hemamali now faced a situation that would be extremely difficult for any woman. Her husband became a political prisoner. She returned to Sri Lanka and obtained employment once again in a private hospital. In 1988 there was a severe shortage of trained nurses and the Ministry of Health opened its doors to employment in this area. Hemamali took the opportunity and went back in the service of the Ministry of Health as a staff nurse in the cardio-thoracic operating theatre.

Hemamali by nature is a person to seize any opportunity in the environment. In 1992, seeing a press notice for a qualifying examination for nurses to work in America (C.G.F.N.S.), Hemamali applied for it. Only three nurses were successful and Hemamali was one of them. However, Hemamali did not have the opportunity to benefit from it, despite her success in the examination. This time it was because of change of political leadership in U.S.A. and the subsequent changes in policies. It was disappointment once again. Hemamali had always felt the need to do higher studies in nursing, an opportunity not available in Sri Lanka then.

The next press notice Hemamali responded to was one inserted by the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) in 1994, calling students for a selection test to follow the B.Sc. (Nursing) degree programme. She was successful at the selection test and by 1997 she had completed the programme. She obtained the B.Sc. (Nursing) degree with Second Class (upper division) that year. Armed with the degree certificate, the knowledge and experience gained during the period of study at the OUSL and the professional nursing qualification and experience, Hemamali once again applied for promotion to the position of Ward Sister. Once again she was not successful and she began again to look out for other opportunities.

Hemamali's next application was for the post of Lecturer (Probationary) in the Department of Health Science of OUSL in January 1998. Not successful once again, but determined, she applied for the same post again in May 1998 and was selected.

In August 1998, Hemamali had the opportunity of proceeding to the University of British Columbia in Canada to pursue postgraduate studies. In Canada, she had to face a completely new and difficult situation. However, she was determined and succeeded in obtaining a Master's of Science degree in Nursing in July 2000. Hemamali is now back in Sri Lanka and contributes very much to the conducting of the B.Sc. (Nursing) programme at the OUSL for the success of her younger colleagues who, like her, are determined to obtain a degree while continuing with full-time employment.

Hemamali says that if one is to succeed with distance education, one has to have determination, be disciplined, be skilled in time management and be ready to make sacrifices. She also says that a supportive family is another very important factor.

What Hemamali is most satisfied about is the fact that she has become a role model for her children who have now re-commenced their higher studies.

**Conclusion**

Like the women featured in the other sections, the four in this section showed that with determination and careful time management, they could succeed in balancing home and family responsibilities with their studies. Premaseeli Amarasinghe even managed, with her husband's support, to cope with the birth of her second child. It was a matter of considerable pride to these women that they were able to provide inspirational role models for their children through their own studying.

# BANGLADESH

**Introduction**

While in 1981 the ratios of males to females in primary, secondary and higher education in Bangladesh were 65:35, 75:25 and 81:19 respectively, by 1997 these had improved to 52:48, 53:47 and 80:20. We can make a quick comparison by saying that while at the national level the secondary ratio stands at 53:47, in the open and distance learning system this ratio is 54:46. In the case of higher education offered by Bangladesh Open University (BOU) it is the same 80:20 ratio as in the national system.

It is very difficult to answer the question, "Is the situation of women's access to distance education a problem in your country?" from inside BOU. Admission to each of the formal education programmes offered by different faculties of BOU are done on a point system, and a fixed number of candidates are allowed to register at each tutorial centre. Hence, at the time of admission, women are neither particularly encouraged to enter through a quota system nor are they denied the right of admission. Only the Certificate in Education has reserved a quota for women as the government encourages recruitment of female teachers at primary level.

Four women have been selected for case studies in this section. There is a contrast between Kalpana Rani Sen, an older student who had to overcome her self-doubts about whether she could study successfully at her age, and Kazi Tauhida Akhter, a young woman from a well-to-do family, but who was unable to earn a place in the competitive conventional university system. Chowdry Shamima Akter is a teacher, wife and mother who undertook a programme to improve her employment prospects, while Mehmuda Begum is a widow who needed to upgrade her educational qualifications in order to support her two children.

## KALPANA RANI SEN: OVERCOMING FEARS

**Monira Hossain**

Kalpana Rani Sen is 55 years old and is a helping hand at the Birganj Government Commerce High School in Dinajpur district, which is in a remote northern area of Bangladesh. Working in a school helped Kalpana nurture her dream of getting an education, and Bangladesh Open University (BOU) helped her realise that dream.

As the father of each and every daughter starts to plan his daughter's marriage at the right time to the right person from the moment of her birth, Kalpana's father got her married to a trader, Shambhu Kanti Sen, at a very early age. Kalpana had one son and two daughters and started taking care of them. Over the years, she got employment in a school and her children started and finished their studies, became established in their professional lives and married.

Throughout the years, Kalpana always kept the dream of continuing education beyond class VIII, and her husband supported her in this wish. It was not possible for her to register at the education board through some school as a private candidate and clear 10 subjects at one sitting. Therefore, BOU came as a saviour.

Two years ago, the Headmaster of her school called her to his room and said, "Kalpana your kalpana ("imagination" in Bangla) is going to become reality." He explained that the neighbouring school, Birganj High School, was being chosen as an alternative centre of education where someone like Kalpana could register.

Kalpana didn't fully understand, so she asked other teachers to get clear information. Then she went to see her colleagues at the school, and they told her to wait till they asked their Head Teacher. She also asked her husband and her children for an explanation. In a short time the whole town started to talk about it. She then began to understand that this new form of Secondary School Certificate (Class X) allowed anybody to choose his or her speed and proceed for the certificate. Slowly the picture became clear.

Kalpana's son asked her if she would be able to manage to study. He offered to help her with her notes, but he worried that his mother's health would prevent her from succeeding. Kalpana was determined to try, but she decided to wait for one year to see how the programme worked. Unfortunately, during that year she became sick at the time of registration, so two years passed by. In the third year she bought the booklet with the application form and sat with her son at home while he explained the whole process slowly. She completed the application form and submitted it. At the time of payment for registration, she hesitated: would she lose her hard-earned money? Her dream told her to go ahead. She collected the course books and brought them home. There were so many books and such thick ones that she became frightened. She remembers:

> On the first session day, I was very hesitant, wondering whether others would sit beside me because I was only a helping hand in a school. I was not used to sitting beside respectable persons at school and I was a bit timid. When I revealed my feelings to my husband, he said to me, "Look you are an SSC student of BOU ("baubi" in Bangla) like the others, so why do you have to be hesitant? You paid for it from your own savings; you must take a front row seat." He offered to accompany me to the next session, but I declared I could manage on my own. Soon, I became a regular at the session days, and I found great joy in being a student again!

For Kalpana, the English books frightened her, as did the maths problems. She made a notebook for each of these two subjects, and took them with her to her school. At tiffin time she would work and show them to the English and Maths teachers and they would correct the mistakes very gladly. Slowly she overcame the hesitation and fear, and there came a time when others liked to look at her notebooks for help.

Her husband advised her to make an application to her Headmaster requesting financial help. Kalpana did this, but the Headmaster informed her that while he had no official power to do it, he would offer a little support from his own pocket. Kalpana thought accepting this offer would diminish her pride, so she gently refused. She now believes that BOU or the government should offer some financial help to those who need it so that they can pursue their studies. She herself worried each time she had to buy the course books that she would lose her money.

Kalpana was more fortunate than some because her teachers all helped her. Other students she met complained about difficulty in understanding, length of the books, etc. She also didn't have to worry about taking care of small children, and she could afford to attend the tutorial sessions. She witnessed

many women coming to attend the sessions partially and hurrying off home to attend to the family. It is quite difficult for Muslim women, as Friday noon is the prayer time for their male family members. Then there was a two-hour break at noon for prayer, and female students would either sit quietly, feeling awkward at that time or they would go home.

Kalpana had hectic school duties to perform as a helper, always carrying out some order. Because she was older, she found that once she got home she didn't have any energy left, but still she had to cook food and serve her husband in the evening. Sometimes her son also needed her, and on the weekends, sometimes the daughters came with their families. All this prevented Kalpana from establishing any fixed schedule, so she learned to utilise her free time at school. Sometimes at night she would fall asleep with the light on in the kitchen while the rest of the family members were sleeping. Sometimes her husband would wake up and find her asleep, telling her that she would go crazy if she became too serious.

Kalpana thought she had better memorise some difficult parts at night, and when she did that she would hear the buzzing sound of insects in the nearby fields. She thought they were keeping her company. Her son would say to her from time to time, "Ma, don't become crazy! You have to live to see the sweet result of your success." But Kalpana says proudly:

> Well, I *did* eventually finish, and I did it without going crazy. My husband and son were both proud of my achievement, just as I am proud of the help and support they gave me to overcome my fears. My advice to other women in my age group and situation is not to allow your fears and self-doubts to stop you, because success is achievable.

## CHOWDHURY SHAMIMA AKTER: SUPPORTIVE FAMILY

**Monira Hossain**

Chowdhury Shamima Akter lives in West Fulbaria, Jamalpur, which is in a remote northern area of Bangladesh. She was born in a semi-urban setting and passed her HSC examination in 1987 uninterrupted. Quite a few years before this, the Directorate of Primary Education started recruiting female teachers with more relaxed educational qualifications than their male counterparts. Chowdhury's family, especially her husband, saw this as a good chance for her. She sat for the examination and through written and viva tests was selected as a primary teacher. At the same time she also registered for the undergraduate programme. She joined the Dighuli Government Primary School as an assistant teacher in 1988, and she passed her undergraduate examination in one attempt, earning her B.A. degree in 1990.

Dighuli Government Primary School is a mixed mode school like all government primary schools. It has an average enrolment of 500 students. There are four teachers apart from the head teacher and they are all graduates. It has a thatched structure, and the most used teaching aid is the blackboard. Student numbers for each class are more than what could be housed in a single room so every class is crowded. As the norm, the teachers enter the classroom with their own chalkboard, duster and cane. Normally, the teachers are overworked and the cane is their main instrument to maintain discipline in a classroom.

According to government rules, non-trained primary school teachers have to register for the Primary Teachers Institute training programme. Chowdhury completed this training at the National Academy for Primary Education, Mymensingh. During her training period, she got a government stipend also.

Mymensingh has three B.Ed. training centres as well as a number of primary training institutes, and Chowdhury had some information on the B.Ed. programme run by Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE). Sometime in 1992, the people of her town and locality started to talk about a new mode of taking a training programme while continuing with their jobs, and slowly radio and television broadcasts told her that there was a possibility of going in for a higher training programme. As primary teachers already had on-the-job training facilities, they were not allowed to go for the B.Ed. professional degree. Though she was a little bit confused between BIDE and BOU, she applied in June 1994 and was lucky enough to be admitted to the B.Ed. programme.

Chowdhury read through the green booklet that came with the application form and learned that there were three tutorial centres at her district. She was willing to be in a mixed centre, but her family preferred the all-women one and she had to give in. She found it odd that in no other district was there this segregation and trainees could share their experiences with male classmates.

The all-female teacher training college is in an old Zaminder locality and for that reason the main academic building is a very nice-looking one. Chowdhury started her twice-monthly Friday tutorial sessions. She collected course books from this centre and became a bit worried when she found that in each of the four semesters she would have to go through six course books. She thought that was a lot to cope with the family and the teaching job. But Chowdhury was desperate to earn her degree, so she told herself she could do it.

One day when she opened a course book, she found a booklet in it; the booklet was addressed to the students. Chowdhury read it, and at her next tutorial session, she asked a few of her classmates about what to do with it. Finally they agreed to complete it in their leisure time and post it to the address given there. At the time of admission Chowdhury didn't know her classmates, but slowly she got to know a good number of them. With determination and her family's continual help she managed to sit for all the six course examinations.

Chowdhury always looked forward to attending the sessions as they gave her the chance to enrich her knowledge. She could discuss matters with others and see what others were doing. For her, the distance of home to the tutorial centres didn't matter, but it did affect her family. Her husband had to accompany Chowdhury with her baby, and although the centre had an arrangement for them, it was difficult. After each session, Chowdhury had to come home with her family. This twice-monthly disturbance was a bit too much for the family members. She had a friend who had even more difficulty; every time she had to leave her home village and travel about 80 kilometres the previous night to be able to attend the next day's tutorial session. She learned one thing from all this: those of her friends who got whole-hearted co-operation from their family members finished the programme in time. Those who had problems eventually dropped out.

The tutors at the tutorial centres kept telling Chowdhury and the other students that their degree would not be accepted by the government, and that by attending only two sessions per semester they were not learning anything. At the time, the students couldn't contact anybody else except these tutors. Now BOU has a Regional Resource Centre (RRC) at Mymensingh, but during Chowdhury's time she had to persuade and send her husband to Dhaka to get some concrete information.

In Chowdhury's second semester she received a new evaluation course book. The tutors began to complain about its difficulty even before the students started the book themselves. All of a sudden Chowdhury found that there were a lot of statistics and that she had to go for at least 60 practice teaching sessions. As well, she was expected to write all the lesson plans in her notebooks. What she and the other students actually did was write them just before the contact sessions. Chowdhury believes it is better to reduce the number and try different formats, especially the short and precise ones.

Chowdhury tried to study at night after she had put her baby to bed. If the baby started to cry, she had to give up for that night. The examinations almost always coincided with her own school's exam so she had a hectic time. She made repeated requests to reschedule but later learned that the tutors and the exam centres were not free to hold the examination at a different time. At home, she had to correct her exam scripts and prepare for her own exam at the same time. As she could foresee this difficulty after the first semester, she used to study regularly, though at a slow pace.

Chowdhury's husband used to say to her, "You know, you should remember that if you wish to get a reward in one area you always deprive some of your near ones: you are progressing at the cost of the love of your child. So, you must bear in mind not to fail in any exam."

At school Chowdhury couldn't officially inform her Headmaster, but her colleagues supported her emotionally. One of her friendly colleagues used to relieve her of her duties during the exam time to help out. When others learned she was passing in all the papers they said they would like to try the B.Ed. themselves.

Chowdhury found that sitting four examinations for a single degree was too much, but as there was nothing she could do about it, she just put in her best efforts. In the exam hall invigilators were helpful with the seating arrangements, explaining the question paper, finding her roll number on the sheets supplied by the exam division, etc. Exam results were very slow in coming; Chowdhury had almost finished the next semester before getting them. And each time she had to go to the Dhaka centre to collect them. But it all paid off finally when she learned she had secured a first class with just 600 marks.

At the beginning of this programme, Chowdhury thought she would be able to shift to secondary teaching, but after four years she is still teaching at the primary level. While she is a little bit disappointed, she chooses to accept the situation. Her family and her husband's job keep her where she is; she cannot shift and get another job. But the degree has given her confidence and depth of thought. Now she doesn't use the cane because she can manage the classroom without it. She also knows how to start and how to end a classroom session.

## MEHMUDA BEGUM: TRUE PERSEVERANCE

**Monira Hossain**

Mehmuda Begum of Comilla is a case of perseverance in real life, of a student who found Bangladesh Open University (BOU) to be an institution for distressed women.

Mehmuda's life began in a very ordinary way, being born to a lower middle-class family. She was given in marriage at the age of 14 to someone who worked in a bank in Dhaka. After marriage she gave birth to two children and was living hand to mouth with the family. Suddenly her husband became sick and the treatment took away all of the family's small savings. Eventually he died, leaving Mehmuda in charge of two minor children. Thanks to her parents' effort she had VIIIth class education, which earned her a job in the same bank. But it is not very easy for a young widow to live with minor children. After a lot of effort she got bank staff accommodation and for that she heaved a sigh of relief. But life doesn't stop at that, and Mehmuda aspired to change her lot slowly. She understood that if she could reach up to graduation she could try for some promotion in the job. She knew that it was a long way but she chose to go for it.

She tried to get admission in NGO-run schools but was told that these schools don't go beyond VIIth class, with an emphasis on skill development. So, that was not her line. She continued her search and went to the Dhaka Board Office (Board of Education) at Bakshi Bazaar, where the officer told her that while they no longer arranged private exams for school certificate and higher school certificate examinations, maybe BOU would do so.

Somebody told her to go to the Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE) office and enquire there. She followed the instruction. During this time the government had established BOU by passing an Act in the Parliament in 1992. BOU initially had rented an office at Dhanmondi. Mehmuda went there and was told to go the Teachers' Training College (TTC) office. There she was told that at that moment they were thinking of restarting the B.Ed. programme run by BIDE, and thus they had nothing available for her.

So Mehmuda kept searching for her path. Eventually, BOU decided to offer a school certificate and higher school certificate in phases, and Mehmuda learnt that faculty teachers there had already started the groundwork. In 1996 she saw an advertisement in the newspaper and went to the TTC office again. This time, she got detailed explanations about how to proceed. She followed the steps one by one and was admitted to the first-ever school certificate batch of BOU. Like others she used to call it "BOU of BIDE."

The day she collected the six course books of the first year and took them home she sat down silently pondering over her future course of action. Would she ever be able to finish all these and a second similar packet in two years' time and grab the school certificate? Others told her that they were given six years to finish the 12 courses, and also that pass marks of the courses would all be retained for this long period. That was a relief to Mehmuda because she has seen her relatives crying for not passing in a single subject like English where the candidate had a choice of getting a second registration and sitting for all the subjects again. Of course she was comparing the conventional with the distance mode.

Now instead of two students, the same household had three because in the meantime her daughter had started school life. Sometimes the sight of all these books made Mehmuda's life very heavy, and she thought of abandoning the programme. But when she attended the first tutorial class she saw that there were older women in her class. One of them was 50 years of age. What a relief!

Eventually she could collect the syllabus booklet and sample questionnaire booklet, but she always had more questions than she got satisfactory answers for. People told her that she could watch television programmes of her lessons at home on a certain day. She couldn't put all the things in order: when to go to her job, how to look after the children, when to sit for study.

During the first exam period she sat for only three subjects, and thus she continued for three consecutive years. In the meantime she had to appoint a tutor for her son and fix a way to pay for the tuition. She got a little bit of money from the bank when her husband died, but she didn't want to use it up this way. She was planning to build a small house in her husband's village for their children. She was almost having a tension breakdown.

Mehmuda used to wish that she could find somebody in the BOU office to talk to. At that time there was only one lady but she was too busy. All the others were male. The tutors didn't have any time to listen to her domestic problems. Her father used to visit her but he would advise her to get into a second marriage. She was not ready for that. She was sure that would complicate the whole process.

With her one salary it was very tough to manage her finances, but she never thought of approaching the bank or the university for financial assistance. Her immediate boss was a lady and she encouraged her a lot. She would even grant her some occasional time off from the office. During her examination time the office allowed her a short study leave.

During this period, apart from her own study, the upbringing of her two minor children occupied her considerably. It was necessary to find some sort of social arrangement that would allow her son to be busy so he wouldn't go astray. She thought she would go mad at times. She would at these times ask her boss's advice but nothing suited her needs. She wondered why BOU couldn't produce educo-amusement videos for people like her children. She started to identify some of the shortcomings of the distance education system in Bangladesh: the counselling section was not fully operative and the course books were quite difficult for the learners without any real-time face-to-face explanations. She eventually completed all the requisite courses though the result was very delayed for reasons not made clear to her. At least she now holds the school certificate.

She understood her personal problems could not be solved quickly, and she decided to continue her study. Eventually she got admission to a regular college, because she found out a drop-out like her would always have a number of problems in the distance mode. A sad surprise waited for her. After a few months the college authority suddenly called her to the office and told that her registration at the college had to be cancelled immediately. They gave her no satisfactory justification. On returning home she cried and cried, but found no solace.

Coming to the exam department of BOU at Gazipur, Mehmuda was again given no clear understandable reason for this act. The officer at BOU told her that they would look into the matter. They did, though it took a long time, and the Ministry of Education finally told the BOU authority that as equivalency between their school certificate and the regular school certificate was yet to be established, only a BOU school certificate holder would get registration for BOU's higher school certificate. So Mehmuda lost one of her very valuable academic years and got admitted into BOU's higher school certificate programme.

This time Mehmuda thinks she is eligible to receive some financial help from BOU as she was quite regular in her SSC study. Now she has also found a nice female officer at the Student Support Service Division at BOU's head office Gazipur.

With her real life difficulty as the experience kit, Mehmuda wishes to make a number of requests to the Open School authority as well as to a few other divisions so that students can get better facilities at BOU. She thinks faculties at the Open School should kindly remember that the female students of the SSC programme are really very much heterogeneous in terms of age, social status, break of study and financial

condition. She believes there should be some official effort to form peer support groups, that women should be given a rest room at the main campus, and they should be provided with guidance section specially equipped with women to listen to their various problems.

Another request she made was to think of arranging some sort of children's corner with toilet facilities, a small canteen and a prayer corner at the exam division where female learners have to come with full family in order to collect mark sheets or provisional certificates.

Mehmuda thinks despite her own multifaceted problems she was able to benefit greatly from the education programme offered by BOU and she invites other women to avail themselves of this opportunity.

## KAZI TAUHIDA AKHTER: NEW GENERATION STUDENT

**Monira Hossain**

Kazi Tauhida Akhter is one of the new generation of open learners who is following the M.B.A. programme at Bangladesh Open University (BOU). She was born in 1974 and comes from a family of three sisters and one brother. Her father is a government official with a nice salary.

Kazi Tauhida originally got admission to the Graduate Diploma in Management (G.D.M.) offered by the School of Business (SoB). This programme offers the chance of being accepted to the prestigious M.B.A. programme if the learner gets a grade point average of more than or equal to 2.75. In this way a learner can get the credits transferred. This system was introduced from the beginning but very few students could show this level of perseverance.

Tauhida was admitted to the G.D.M. in 1998, and she eventually started the M.B.A. programme in 1999. She completed her regular master's degree in Economics from the Dhaka University in 1998 and secured a second class there. Side by side with doing G.D.M., Tauhida appeared at the Public Service Examination over two consecutive years. In continuation of the first year, she recently appeared at a viva and is now waiting for the final result. Her first and second choices were research assistant and teaching jobs.

Kazi Tauhida was told that she could start the regular M.B.A. at any of the renowned private universities, which her father could afford financially, but she thought of doing it slowly and steadily. She was quite determined from the beginning to get automatic acceptance in the M.B.A. programme so she studied seriously throughout the G.D.M. programme.

Tauhida aspires to have peer group discussion and would like to have real-time contact with seniors of the same programme. She doesn't feel the absence of any other female student, even though she has not met the only other female M.B.A. student at the nearby tutorial centre.

**Conclusion**

Bangladesh is a country where, traditionally, women's access to education has not been regarded as important. Nevertheless, these case studies show some encouraging signs of sons, husbands and fathers supporting their mothers, wives or daughters to study because they can see the potential benefits for the whole family. These women tell stories of their persistence with their studies and particularly of overcoming their self-doubts about their adequacy as students.

# CONCLUSION

In this book we have examined 23 cases of women who have succeeded in distance education, in many cases in spite of adversity, and have improved not only their own quality of life but also that of their families and even communities. In conclusion, let us re-examine the main issues that were addressed in the case studies.

- ***Distance education can benefit the husband, children and family without taking the wife/mother away from the home too much to do her studies.***

There are several examples of how the woman's success in her studies helped the family economically. For example, for Mabel Tam Fung-yi (Hong Kong), her degree has meant a promotion to a senior teaching position in her school and a corresponding substantial increase in salary. There is also evidence of single mothers becoming stronger both financially and emotionally to be able to support their children better:

> I need to be tough and must not be defeated. I was not born to be a tough person but my personal experiences have trained me to be — not because I can't bear to lose, but because I must protect my children well since they have nobody except me. Without me, who is going to do this?
>
> *Esther Chan Shuk-fong, Hong Kong*

> I was totally unequipped for a job. Like girls from other conservative families, I did my B.A. and got married. I depended first on my family and then on my husband for everything…[But] suddenly, you can lose your partner or anything else may happen. You have to be prepared for any eventuality… Distance education has helped me rebuild my life [after being widowed]. I can take care of my children and give them the education and facilities that my husband and I had hoped they would have.
>
> *Anuradha Datt, India*

One inspiring story showed how one woman was able to help her whole community by her own efforts after studying agriculture by distance education. She was set up as a model for the local farmers to follow and then invited to be a part-time tutor in the local Liaoyuan School:

> Through my own experience and learning method, I instructed the new viewers on how to apply what they learnt to real life and how they could find pleasure and courage from their learning programmes. I received many friends and guests, who came from African or Asian countries such as Mali, Japan and Korea. I never expected that by cultivating strawberries I could make any contribution to international friendship!
>
> *Li Rong, China*

- ***The woman herself can benefit.***

One of the greatest benefits for the women described in the case studies was the opportunity for a "second chance" at education. One of these was Wu Zhuhui, whose education was interrupted by the Cultural

Revolution in China. She began to work, married and started a family, but she never gave up her dream of further education:

> Though it seemed that my life was going well, I had never given up my desire to study further. From the television and newspapers, I learnt there was a TV university that was very flexible for people like me to choose venues and subjects.

For Esther Chan Shuk-fong (Hong Kong), there were direct career benefits as the result of her studying. But it was the sense of self-fulfilment, the personal growth and the increased ability to see things more broadly that were the main benefits for her. And she believes she has gained much more than just the degree — she has also made some very good friends with the members of her study groups. She has learned better time-management skills, is better able to face problems and deal with difficulties in a more systematic manner and has greater confidence in talking to people.

Shahnaz Basheer (Pakistan), who completed her matriculation by distance education after an abusive marriage and eventually divorce, could have been speaking for many of the women when she said:

> In many people's opinion it was not a big achievement, but for me, it meant a lot. Now I can apply for many jobs like midwifery, health visitor and teacher in a vocational centre. I was glad. Without that certificate I had nothing to be proud about. Education provided me opportunities to improve my life and I did.

- ***Children can benefit rather than suffer.***

One way in which some of the mothers reported that they had benefited their children was through direct role modelling of good study habits:

> My daughters were nine and six when I started, and by watching me study they developed their own good habits. Now, at ages 13 and 10, their learning is active and they can handle their work independently without supervision…In the past the status of women such as my mother was low. If there were any changes to her life she could not handle them; they would have adverse effects on her children, and this in turn contributes to the increasing number of problem children that affect society.
>
> *Mabel Tam Fung-yi, Hong Kong*

> First, I had made the commitment to myself to finish the course. Also, I could not afford to set an example of quitting for my son because of the problems he was experiencing with his own schooling. I knew it was important for him to see me trying my best in spite of the difficulties. Now that he is older and has gone overseas to continue his own studies, he says that I was a good role model, teaching him perseverance.
>
> *Esther Chan Shuk-fong*

Che Zhengying (China) found a creative way to involve her daughter in her studies and to teach her daughter in a simplified way:

> I could use simple words to tell some of the Chinese and foreign literature stories I was reading to my daughter. First I let her listen to the ancient poems as I read them aloud; then I taught her to recite them. In this way, not only did I satisfy my daughter, I also taught her to study herself. She

received some enlightened education as a little girl and as a result performed better than other pupils when she studied in the primary school.

- ***A mother who studies can still be devoted to her children.***

The issue of not taking time away from the children is important for mothers considering study, and also for fathers who are considering whether or not to support the wife's study. Mabel Tam Fung-yi (Hong Kong) said that when she finally discussed with her husband her desire to study, he was not against her doing it, but was not really in favour. He cautioned that she must not neglect their two children because of her studies. Esther Chan Shuk-fong (Hong Kong) also emphasised the importance of this:

> I am always available for my children whenever they need me. All of my personal life is given to my children. I must spend a vacation with them at least once a year. Besides the routine work, I spend all of my time with my children. This helps me to strike the balance between my work and my family.

- ***Distance education can enable the mother to stay home with the children.***

One of the advantages of distance education is that it enables the mother to spend more of her time at home with her children if it is necessary for her to do so. Mabel Tam Fung-yi (Hong Kong) formed a study group with some of her classmates and they studied together, often in Mabel's home so that her children could see that she really *was* studying, and not going out to enjoy herself as her mother-in-law had led them to believe.

- ***Sharing experiences of opposition from family members and how this changed.***

One important benefit of this book of case studies is that it enables women from vastly different cultures to share the common difficulties that they experienced. As a single mother, Esther Chan Shuk-fong (Hong Kong) went through more difficulties while she was studying than many people experience in their whole lives. Most of the difficulties arose from her job, but she could not leave the job as she needed a steady and good income to support her family.

Mabel Tam Fung-yi (Hong Kong) had a lot of opposition from her mother-in-law, who looked down on her because of her childhood background and tried to turn the children against her studies by telling them constantly that Mabel was not really going out to study, she was going out to play. Two of the Indian women reported similar problems:

> [My mother-in-law] concluded that I was the victim of some witchcraft to sit there staring at a book for so long…[My daughters] did not consider it possible for their mother to study books, write a diary and a report and pass an examination. They told me that studying at my age is not easy and that I should not cherish the dream of completing the course.
>
> *Shanta, India*

When Anuradha Datt drove herself to her counselling classes, her mother-in-law found all this highly suspect: "Where does she go? Who knows?" she would taunt.

Although her mother-in-law didn't change her opposition to women being educated, Mabel believes that in her heart she has new respect for what Mabel achieved. Shanta also reported a positive end to the story

of her daughters' opposition. When she passed her final examination with a B grade, while only expecting a C, her daughters were, of course, overjoyed.

- ***Distance education can help women overcome fears and worries about being a student.***

As well as sharing their difficulties, it is valuable for women to recognise that others experience doubts and fears about being students. Several of the women expressed these fears.

> I had not studied for so long — could I catch up? I was nearly 40 — would it be too late? My elder daughter was in her fifth year of primary school — should I spend more time with her to help give her every chance of earning a place in a better secondary school? Would my husband support me? Would there be any financial problems?
>
> *Mabel Tam Fung-yi, Hong Kong*

> As a student in TV University, I had to study complicated calculus and advanced mathematics. The pressure was much greater than what I had previously encountered when working in the field, in the factory and in the department store. I had to spend double or triple time in learning compared with the other younger students. I often wondered, "Could I manage?"
>
> *Wu Zhuhui, China*

> On the first session day, I was very hesitant, wondering whether others would sit beside me because I was only a helping hand in a school. I was not used to sitting beside respectable persons at school and I was a bit timid. When I revealed my feelings to my husband, he said to me, "Look you are an SSC student of BOU ("baubi" in Bangla) like the others, so why do you have to be hesitant? You paid for it from your own savings; you must take a front row seat." He offered to accompany me to the next session, but I declared I could manage on my own. Soon, I became a regular at the session days, and I found great joy in being a student again!
>
> *Kalpana Rani Sen, Bangladesh*

- ***Women supporting each other.***

The case studies include some inspiring anecdotes about how the women got together and supported each other in their studies.

> I approached some of my classmates and suggested that we form a study group to help and support each other…Being a member of this group made my studying easier and I finished my Bachelor of Primary Education degree in four years rather than in the six that I had planned.
>
> *Mabel Tam Fung-yi, Hong Kong*

> If the tutor for any course was not supportive, then the students had to solve problems for themselves. My solution was to ask other students in my tutorial groups if they would like to form study groups. Out of 11 courses that I studied, I was able to set up study groups with fellow students in three of them. This was one of the main reasons for my survival. In fact, even though I have now graduated, I have kept in contact with one of the groups and continued to help them to complete their studies. Another reason for my survival was that I constantly reminded myself that I had made the commitment to do the programme. Nobody was forcing me, so it was up to me to put in the effort.
>
> *Esther Chan Shuk-fong, Hong Kong*

Che Zhengying (China) had been appointed as a caretaker of her class as well as being a student. At the beginning of the course, the university was short of classroom and teaching facilities. Che Zhengying searched suitable places and raised some money together with her classmates to buy some audiovisual aids. In the meantime, she spent a lot of time searching among the traditional universities for a good teacher to act as tutor for the TV class. In addition, she had to persuade some students' work units to support their staff's study. Some work units stopped providing the students' salaries, so Che Zhengying and other students contributed some money to help them overcome difficulties in life. She made up her mind not to let any student drop out.

- ***Sharing experience of sacrifices and difficulties.***

Many women feel that they are alone in experiencing difficulties or having to make sacrifices in order to complete their studies. We hope that this book of case studies will help readers who do feel this way to realise that many others have experienced problems too, but that they were eventually able to overcome them and succeed in spite of the obstacles. One of the greatest problems cited in the case studies was the need to balance the multiple duties as wives, mothers, daughters and students.

Seema Pal found that after she had her daughter, it was very difficult to find study time. At first she thought she would keep the afternoon as her study time when the morning housework was taken care of and her daughter slept. Things, however, did not proceed as she had planned. The housework took much longer to finish as she had to interrupt the work several times to attend to her daughter. Her mother-in-law did help with the child, but Seema still had to take time out. By the time she came back to her room after lunch, she was too tired to begin serious studies. She began to lag behind in her schedules that she had planned for herself. She found that fulfilling her household and family responsibilities, looking after an infant and studying for a postgraduate programme at the same time sometimes became too much:

> Those days I felt that I had got onto a conveyer belt which went on and on and once on it, I did not know how to get down.

Mabel Tam (Hong Kong) once came close to giving up her studies when she had to spend three nights working overnight to complete an assignment:

> It was midnight. The weather was very cold. My husband and children were enjoying their sleep in their warm beds. I was full of self-pity, and I wept.

Fortunately, however, when morning came and Mabel had finally finished her assignment, she felt a sense of satisfaction and decided that it really was worth the sacrifice.

Culturally women have been making sacrifices for various causes — for husbands, children and families. In cultures such as India's, they have made the supreme sacrifice of sati at the funeral pyre of the dead husband. The sacrifices made in the interest of education have resulted in success. The women featured in the case studies are more confident, more motivated and more determined to succeed than ever before. The only point is to get the right opportunity. Open and distance learning has not just provided the opportunity but has also subverted the myths and stereotypes that have often undermined the processes of awareness and empowerment.

Do not believe in the myth that women cannot find the time for education. I found distance education my solution to achieve my goals while holding a full-time job and being a good wife and mother. If I can do it, so can you.

*Premaseeli Amarasinghe, Sri Lanka*

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